



IRAN'S AGE OF EMPIRE
BOOK 1

DISCOVERING CYRUS

THE PERSIAN CONQUEROR
ASTRIDE THE ANCIENT WORLD

REZA ZARGHAMEE



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MAGE PUBLISHERS

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To my family and friends

Contents

Acknowledgments

Prologue

A Note on the Major Sources

A Note on the Rendering of Names

Ancient Names

Modern Iranian Toponyms

Cast of Characters

Achaemenid Family Tree

Deiocid Family Tree; The House of Cyrus

Map

Prelude

ONE

A Nascent People: The Arrival of the Medes and

Persians in Western Iran

The Ravages of Assyria

Settlement in Parsa

TWO

The March of Empires: Assyrians, Scythians, and
Medes

Early Movements toward Median Unification

The Nomadic Onslaught

Fall of the Assyrian Empire

*The Historical Significance of the Assyrian Empire
Further Median Conquests in the Caucasus and Asia
Minor*

THREE

A Life Shrouded in Myth: Cyrus' Origins and Early Years

The Founder Legends

Heir to Two Thrones

Portents of Glory

Early Military and Political Experience

Persia and Media in the Early Sixth Century bce

FOUR

Overthrow of the Medes: Symbols of Power

Causes of War

Disaffection of the Median Nobility

Royal Aspirations at Ecbatana and Return to Persia

The New King of Persia

The Onset of Rebellion

The Defeat of Astyages

*The Capture of Ecbatana and the Birth of the
Achaemenid Empire*

FIVE

Subjugation of Lydia and Ionia

Military Forays into the West

Hostile Relations with Persia's Western Neighbors

Defeat of Croesus and the Fall of Sardis

The Lydian Revolt and the Conquest of Ionia

Additional Conquests in Asia Minor

SIX

The Sun and the Sky: Iranian Religion in the Age of Cyrus

Prophet Zoroaster and His Message

The Return of the Old Indo-Iranian Gods

Cyrus the Zoroastrian?

Zoroastrianism among the Early Persian Laity

The Lord of Wide Pastures

Mithra the Principal Deity of the Medes

Foreign Influences on the Median Cult of Mithra

*The Religious Aspects of the Persian Rebellion and Its
Consequences in Iran*

Cyrus and the Magi

SEVEN

In the Paths of Heroes: The Conquest of Eastern Iran

*Chronology of Conquests and the Political Landscape of
Pre-Achaemenid Eastern Iran and Central Asia*

A Search for Heritage?

From Persia to Bactria

Conquests in Transoxiana

The Approaches to India

EIGHT

The Fall of a Civilization: The Persian Conquest of Babylonia

A Land in Turmoil

Traitor Gobryas

*Earlier Conflicts Between the Persian and Babylonian
Empires*

Persian and Babylonian Propaganda

The Persian Advance and the Captivity of the Gods
A Glorious Conquest

NINE

The Lord's Anointed: Cyrus and Israel

"He Is My Shepherd"

Was the Persians' Treatment of the Jews "Special"?

Was There Iranian Religious Influence upon Judaism?

Specific Instances of Possible Iranian Influence

TEN

One King of Many, One Lord of Many: The Royal
Ideology and Administration of the Persian Empire

From Tribal Leader to Great King

*The Diverse Origins and Mystical Aspects of Persian
Kingship*

The King as Terrible, Merciful, and Giving

Imperial Administration and High-Level Bureaucracy

Monumental Inscriptions and Imperial Chancellery

The Quality of Persian Rule

ELEVEN

The Persian Oecumene in Reality and Art

Iranian Diaspora and Cultural Syncretism

Seats of Power: Ecbatana, Babylon, Susa, Pasargadae

TWELVE

With Horse and Bow: The Ancient Persian Army

The Persian Standing Army

Persian Infantry

The Ten Thousand Immortals

Persian Cavalry

Persian Chariots

Training, Auxiliaries, and Organization

Numbers and Battle Tactics

The Death Toll in Ancient Battles

Siege Warfare and Engineering Feats

The King at War, Cyrus as a Commander

THIRTEEN

Cyrus the Father: The Glory Days of Cyrus, King of Persia

Cyrus and the Persian Nobility

The House of Cyrus

Plans to Invade Egypt

FOURTEEN

The Way of the Warrior: Cyrus' Death in Central Asia

The Nomads of the Caspian Steppe

Death on the Northeastern Frontier

Burial in Pasargadae

FIFTEEN

The Empire after Cyrus

Epilogue

Cyrus' Legacy

Appendix I

Cyrus, Darius, and the Early History of the Achaemenid Dynasty

The Inscriptions at Pasargadae and the Invention of the Old Persian Script

The Absence of Achaemenes in Cyrus' Babylonian

Inscriptions

Darius' Need for Legitimacy

*The Sharing of Power Between the Ancestors of Cyrus
and Darius*

Chronological Considerations

Appendix II

Titles and Name of Cyrus

The Title "King of Anshan"

The Names "Cyrus," "Cambyses," and "Teispes"

Appendix III

Additional Thoughts on the Median Worship of Mithra

The Evidence for the Median Worship of Mithra

The Form Mithra's name

The Legend of Deioces

Mithra and Nisaya

Mithra the Baga Par Excellence

The Frontiers of the Iranian World in the Mihr
Yasht

*Evidence for the Syncretic Identification of the Median
Mithra with Shamash*

*A Babylonian-Influenced Median Mithraic Cult of the
Planets*

*Evidence for the Syncretic Identification of the Median
Mithra with Nergal*

Median Exposure to the Cult of Nergal

Nergal's Assimilation with Mithra

Nergal's Animal Avatars and Attributes

The Cult Title Khshathrapati

The Alleged Iranian Practice of Human Sacrifice

The Desertion of Median Settlements

Mithra's Waning Fortunes under Darius and Xerxes

Gaumata's Veneration of Mithra

The Identification of Gaumata with Azhi Dahaka

The Purge of the Magi

Mithra in the Persepolis Archives

Achaemenid Military Processions

Xerxes' Persecution of the Daivas

Mithra's Revival under Xerxes' Successors

The Religious Climate Under Artaxerxes I and Darius II

The Religious Proclamations of Artaxerxes II

The Proliferation of Temples Named After Mithra

Artaxerxes III

The Evidence of the Shahnameh

Conclusion

Appendix IV

Cyrus and the Cult of the Goddess Anahita

Appendix V

Ugbaru, Oebaras, Gobryas, and the Land of Gutium

The Province of Gutium in the Babylonian Chronicle and Inscriptions of Cyrus

The Name "Ugbaru" as a Rendering of Oebaras, not Gobryas

Gobryas' Involvement in the Persian Conquest of Babylonia

The Location of Gobryas' Province

Conclusion

Appendix VI

The Babylonian Chronicle

The Chronicle Inscription

Appendix VII

The Cyrus Cylinder

The Historical Significance of the Cyrus Cylinder

The Inscription on the Cylinder

Appendix VIII

The Verse Account of Nabonidus

Column 1

Column 2

Column 3

Column 4

Column 5

Column 6

Appendix IX

The Dynastic Prophecy

Appendix X

Second Isaiah and the Cyrus Cylinder

Appendix XI

Second Isaiah, Cyrus, and Yahweh the Creator

Appendix XII

Cyrus and the Book of Daniel

Appendix XIII

The Satrapies

Appendix XIV

Paradises

Appendix XV

Herodotus' Roster of the Achaemenid Army

Appendix XVI

The Saka Tigrakhauda

The Tribes Comprising the Saka Tigrakhauda

The Origins of the Epithet "Tigrakhauda"

The Saka Tigrakhauda as the Great Turanian Enemy of the Western Iranians

Customs of the Saka Tigrakhauda

Religious Beliefs

Did the Saka Tigrakhauda Practice Matriarchy?

Ethnography of the Saka Tigrakhauda

Appendix XVII

Saka Epic Traditions

Appendix XVIII

The Cyrus Legends and the Iranian Epics

The Legends of Cyrus and Sargon as an Example

Cyrus and Thraetona

Cyrus and Kavi Husravah

Cyrus and Kavi Vishtaspa

The Cyrus Legends and the Development of the Epics

The Cyrus Legends as a Window into the Conqueror's Personality

The Influence of the Magi in Memorializing Persian History

Conclusion

Appendix XIX

Cyrus and Dhu'l-Qarnain

Appendix XX

The Achaemenid King as Universal Savior

The “Royal Hero” Redefined

*The Book of Daniel as a Reflection of Achaemenid
Soteriological Propaganda*

*Eschatological Propaganda within the Long View of
Iranian History*

Endnotes

Bibliography

Textual Sources

Internet Sources

Image Sources and Credits

About the Author

Index

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book does not endeavor to be a dry, clinical analysis of historical information. Rather, the purpose is to bring Cyrus the Great, one of antiquity's most important figures, and his world to life. One might say that the effort is impossible given the meager and controversial nature of the sources, but in light of what Cyrus achieved, it is both worthwhile and timely.

What this book aims to do is to strike a balance between the traditional, narrative-based classical accounts of Cyrus and the recent scholarship, which tends to be more technical and dry in its deconstruction of the evidence. The intent is to produce, to the maximum extent possible, a biography of the man and a history of the region. This necessitates separating fact from fiction in the classical accounts, by comparing these accounts to each other and, whenever possible, to the information obtained through archaeological finds and linguistic studies. It also entails making determinations using tangential evidence, knowledge of broader cultural traditions, and an in-depth understanding of the times.

In the end, we will likely never know the true

story of Cyrus with detailed precision; he lived too long ago, and too little has survived from his reign. But what I have attempted to do is to look at whatever sources are available and to triangulate this material to paint an honest picture of the life and times of an important historical figure, whose tale deserves to be told.

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PROLOGUE

Democracy and globalization – these are, perhaps, the two most important sociopolitical issues of the present day. Democracy is the legacy of the ancient Greeks. The origins of globalization lie farther to the east. One of the earliest and most successful attempts at establishing a global community occurred in the sixth century BCE. It resulted from the coming together of ethnically diverse nations and tribes within the Iranian plateau. This political and ideological union set the stage for the creation of a diverse empire extending from India to the Aegean Sea, in which each nation was more or less free to live according to its own customs and a high premium was placed upon intellectual and commercial exchange. The visionary founder of this empire, the largest the world had yet seen, was Cyrus II of Persia, better known as Cyrus the Great. A scion of the ruling dynasty of the Achaemenids, one of the leading clans in the Persian migration to southwestern Iran, Cyrus was born around 590 BCE and died in 530 BCE.

The Persian Empire that Cyrus founded maintained its far-flung borders for nearly two centuries with an impressively modest exertion of

force.¹ This was largely due to Cyrus' open-minded cultural outlook and policy of tolerance, which his successors followed in varying degrees. During these years, the Near East benefited from the institution of the *Pax Achaemenica*, or "Achaemenid Peace." The relative tranquility of the Persian period distinguished it from the dominion of earlier monarchies, as well as the later era of Macedonian hegemony. Less than a century before Cyrus sat upon the Persian throne, much of the Near East lay prostrate before the vaunted Assyrian Empire. The kings of this warlike state believed that their mandate was to destroy and enslave the various nations of the world, so the three centuries of Assyrian domination (911–612 BCE) stand out as one of the most brutal in history, replete with episodes of mass execution, torture, and population displacement.

Of course, the harsh treatment of foreign peoples had been commonplace since the dawn of civilization. Living in today's interconnected world, we might easily underestimate how completely alien foreign peoples appeared to one another in ancient times. Most ancient peoples had little concept of what lay beyond the proverbial mountains, and whatever did had to be strange, dangerous, and hardly deserving of mercy. Thus, the clemency that Cyrus demonstrated toward his foreign subjects – many of whom had no prior contacts with the Persians – ran counter to what most of his contemporaries would have considered to be human nature.

Relative to his imperial predecessors, Cyrus achieved his conquests with less cruelty and bloodshed. He could be harsh, no doubt, but his general policy was to avoid inflicting harm upon

civilian populations and to spare enemy leaders, often allowing them to retain a princely lifestyle after their defeat. His attitude toward ancient civilizations was one of respect and admiration, and this mindset made Persian rule acceptable to many of the empire's subjects.

One of Cyrus' outstanding attributes was his ability to maintain order between the various peoples that he ruled, many of whom had long-standing ethnic rivalries. He set great stock in presiding over a structured state apparatus and, to this end, organized his empire into provinces interconnected by a vast network of roads that facilitated communications, troop movements, and commerce. This administrative system underwent several modifications during the long years of Persian rule, but its fundamental features never changed.

In view of the above, it is no wonder that the fourth century BCE Athenian writer Xenophon made the Persian conqueror the subject of his didactic novel on statecraft, entitled the *Cyropaedia*, or "Education of Cyrus." For Xenophon, Cyrus was the paragon of chivalry, a man of his word so valorous and mighty that none could resist him. Consider Xenophon's assertion that "Cyrus did indeed eclipse all other monarchs, before or since, and . . . not only those who have inherited their power, but those who have won empire by their own exertions."² These are powerful words coming from a man who spent much of his life fighting the Persians.

Nor was Xenophon the only foreigner to sing Cyrus' praises. The Greeks were generally enthralled by him, despite their cultural biases and the wars they fought against Cyrus' successors. The fifth century BCE

Athenian playwright Aeschylus, a veteran of the so-called Persian Wars (490–479 BCE), offered Cyrus the following encomium:

Cyrus by fortune graced,
Adorned the throne and blessed his grateful friends
With peace. He to his mighty
Monarchy joined Lydia and the Phrygians. To his power
Ionia bent reluctant; but the gods
With victory his gentle virtues crowned.³

An even more positive appraisal of the Persian conqueror occurs in the Old Testament. The ancient Jews, who feared outsiders and decried the various nations that routinely threatened their autonomy, anointed Cyrus as their chosen prince, or Messiah, making him the only Gentile to bear that venerable title.

What made Cyrus so popular? According to Xenophon, it was his strength of character:

It is obvious that among the congeries of nations [that Cyrus ruled] few, if any, could have spoken the same language as himself, or understood one another, but nonetheless Cyrus was able so to penetrate that vast extent of country by the sheer force of his personality that the inhabitants were prostrate before him: not one of them dared lift hand against him. And yet he was able, at the same time, to inspire them all with so deep a desire to please him and win his favor that all they asked was to be guided by his judgment and his alone.⁴

The sources for the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE provide a somewhat different explanation for Cyrus' success: he was able to intertwine his own ambitions with the needs and wants of his subjects. On the eve of its destruction, Babylonia was a kingdom rife with social problems. Its ruler,

Nabonidus (reigned 556–539 BCE), had attempted an unpopular reform of the state religion, and the imperial capital itself was divided along ethnic lines. The city of Babylon and its surroundings contained an enormous community of exiles, whom the Babylonian kings had forcibly relocated from the countries they had conquered. Many of these peoples, among them a large number of Jews, longed to return home. Cyrus' sophisticated propaganda campaign succeeded in bringing these disaffected groups within Babylonian society to his side in advance of his military expedition. He portrayed himself as the champion of the Babylonian national religion, while promising reparations and a return home for the Jews and other exiles, and he followed through on his promises. Thus, the authors of the Book of Isaiah, one of the most moving parts of the Old Testament, properly saw in Cyrus' coming the revival of Israel:

Shine, shine Jerusalem; for thy light is come,
And the glory of Yahweh is risen upon thee.

...

Lift up thine eyes, look round, and see thy children
assembled;

All thy sons are come from afar, and thy daughters carried on
their shoulders.

Then thou shalt see and tremble, and be transported at heart,
That the wealth of the sea is turned to thee,

And of nations and peoples.⁵

Meanwhile, the priests of Marduk, the chief deity of the Babylonian pantheon, praised Cyrus in terms of the earlier Mesopotamian kings whom they venerated for laying the foundations of the great god's cult. Cyrus seems to have understood that people are driven by certain basic needs: the preservation of

social order and local autonomy.

How Cyrus arrived at this understanding is itself an interesting story. Conquest was the calling of royalty in his age, and, born the heir apparent to two Iranian kingdoms, Media and Persia, Cyrus was well steeped in the warrior's way.* His policy of benevolence started, ironically, with an act of treason. Because his father was Persian, certain noble Medes, reluctant to see their kingdom pass to a Persian prince, prevailed upon his maternal grandfather, the Median king Astyages, to select another heir. This perceived betrayal outraged Cyrus, who responded by leading the Persians to war. When after three years of harsh combat he found himself master of all Media, he faced an important decision: should he allow the Persians, who had suffered under Median rule, to vent their anger upon the conquered, or should he behave like a legitimate Median king, which is all he had wanted to be in the first place? Cyrus chose the latter course and thus set the tone for his subsequent conquests.

With Media under control, he occupied the powerful kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor, which had foolishly goaded him into war. He then solidified his rule over eastern Iran, western India, and parts of Central Asia. Wherever he went, he respected the traditions of local cults, heard petitions, and secured the allegiance of influential groups or segments of the population. News of his deeds spread far and wide, such that, by the time he descended upon Babylonia, his last major conquest, his reputation as a chivalrous prince had preceded him. The people of Babylon surrendered their city to him without a fight, not just to avoid a protracted siege, but also, seemingly, in

anticipation of a better tomorrow.

In the eyes of his own people, too, Cyrus was larger than life. The Persians well understood that without him they would have been just another highland tribe, perhaps always destined for subservience to a foreign power. Not only did Cyrus preserve their identity and liberty, but he bestowed upon them the greatest empire the world had then seen. So much did Cyrus give the Persians that they remembered him as their “Father.”⁶ And like a father, he educated them in the ways of the world; Cyrus impressed upon the Persians the need to cooperate with foreigners and so created the powerful ideology of the Persian Empire: one world, united, containing “all kinds of men,” on equal footing beneath the almighty ruler known simply as “the King.”⁷ Democracy it was not, and for this the Greeks derided it; but it was also, perhaps, less hypocritical than most ancient democracies.

Across the ruined walls of Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of Cyrus’ successors, the ideology of the empire’s ruling race is still on display: standing upright, dressed in native garb and bearing gifts, the representatives of each subject nation march toward the King, all the while grasping in friendship the hands of their Persian ushers. Such scenes represent a far cry from the images of war and conquest that the Assyrians used in their royal art.

It was Cyrus’ ability to bring various peoples together in the grand venture of empire that made him one of history’s great nation builders. It is unfortunate, then, that of the three great conquerors of the ancient world – Cyrus, Alexander, and Julius Caesar – Cyrus is the least well understood. In part,

this has to do with the failure of the ancient Persians to preserve their history in a meaningful written form that has survived. One might be surprised to learn that the Iranians themselves had all but forgotten Cyrus' name by the third century CE. They became reacquainted with him only relatively recently, beginning in the nineteenth century, due to their increased familiarity with Western scholarship.

Another factor in our poor understanding of Cyrus is the common perception within this scholarship that the ancient Persians failed to leave behind a substantive cultural legacy for the West. The tendency among scholars has been to treat the ancient Persians as able conquerors that contributed little to the advancement of civilization.⁸ As a result, little attention has been paid to the development of a comprehensive account of Cyrus' life and times.

The irony is that Cyrus and the Persians did, in fact, leave their mark on Western civilization and at a very fundamental level. The cultural ferment of the Persian period resulted in Judaism's development of several important religious doctrines, such as God's creation of the universe, the coming of the apocalypse, and a final judgment. These concepts had not been intrinsic to the Semitic religious tradition from which Judaism first sprang, but they had served an integral function in Zoroastrianism, the Iranian religion that Cyrus and his successors followed. It was these concepts that eventually defined the ethical system of Christianity, and although direct evidence is lacking, a strong case can be made that the development of these doctrines within Judaism reflects Iranian influence.

Furthermore, Cyrus and his Achaemenid successors set a new standard for future states.

Conquerors, such as Alexander, adopted, to varying degrees, the same methods of political administration employed by the Persians, and the territorial scope and efficiency of Persian rule made clear to the West that it was possible to establish a large, multi cultural state, in which diverse ethnic and religious groups might live side by side. Indeed, it was interaction with the Persians and the civilizations they ruled that expanded the horizons of early Western thought beyond the level of the city-state.

Cyrus thus represents the most important historical personage to bridge the gap between East and West in ancient times. Both biblical and classical authors recognized Cyrus as the paragon of princely virtue. His rule was based on tolerance and order and provided a much needed respite to a world that had suffered through long years of violence and oppression. In sum, he was a monumental figure well ahead of his time.

* A number of scholars have recently challenged the historical traditions asserting a dynastic connection between Cyrus and the Medes. It is certainly possible that these tales, intended as propaganda, evolved to legitimize Cyrus' later claims to the Median throne, but the circumstances of his rise to power strongly indicate otherwise. See page 53 and Chapter 4.

A NOTE ON THE MAJOR SOURCES

The ancient Persians did not preserve the history of the Achaemenid Empire in a reliable, narrative form. The empire itself did not shun written records. The imperial bureaucracy employed a fairly sophisticated recordkeeping system, but most of the writing was done in Aramaic, a script designed for use on parchment, leather, and other perishable materials that have not survived. Several Achaemenid kings commissioned monumental inscriptions in Old Persian and other scripts suitable for carving on clay and stone. However, the vast majority of these texts are brief and formulaic and, thus, only marginally useful in reconstructing a history of Cyrus' life and times. The annals of the Assyrian kings provide enlightening glimpses into the early history of the Medes and Persians before Cyrus was born, and Babylonian and biblical texts offer only patchy coverage of his reign.¹ The classical sources remain our most important authorities for the period.

The ancient Greeks were, perhaps, the most literate people of their time and developed a firm appreciation for written history by the middle of the fifth century BCE. Their notion of history was more expansive than that of other ancient peoples: they sought to explain historical events in terms of cultural,

political, and philosophical values. Three Greek authors – Herodotus, Ctesias, and Xenophon – composed detailed narratives of Cyrus’ life that have survived to the present.

Herodotus, the “Father of History,” was born around 485 BCE in the Greek colony of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum), located on the western coast of Asia Minor in ancient Caria. Caria was then under Persian rule, meaning that Herodotus was born and raised a subject of the Achaemenid kings. As a young man, Herodotus traveled extensively throughout the western half of the Achaemenid Empire and visited, among other places, Egypt, Babylonia, and Phoenicia. Later in life, he ventured to Athens, the Crimea, and Italy, where died in 425 BCE. It is now generally accepted that he never made it to Iran, but he asked about native customs and history wherever he went and wrote the product of his inquiries, or *Historiae* (commonly translated into English as *The Histories*), in nine books, each dedicated to a different Muse.² The first six books track the expansion of the Achaemenid Empire, with lengthy digressions on the individual histories and cultures of the Persians and the peoples they subdued; the final three books recount Xerxes I’s failed invasion of Greece in 480–479 BCE.

Herodotus’ sources on Cyrus and the Iranians included Medes and Persians who had settled in the empire’s western provinces, and some of these individuals may be identified with reasonable certainty.³ Herodotus also relied upon earlier writers, whose works are now lost or preserved in fragments. The most important of these was Hecataeus (lived 550–476 BCE), a native of the Greek colony of Miletus. Hecataeus composed both a universal history and a

geography of Europe, Asia, and Africa that contained much ethnographical information that Herodotus seems to have borrowed.⁴ Another important source was the famous navigator Scylax of Caryanda, who explored parts of the Indian Ocean, Caspian Sea, and other bodies of water for the Persian kings during the late sixth century BCE. A fellow Greek from Caria, Scylax published an account of his voyages in a book entitled the *Periplus*, or *Circumnavigation*, to which Herodotus presumably had access.⁵

Herodotus penned *The Histories* with important themes in mind. The main subject of his work was the Persians' failed attempts to conquer mainland Greece during the early fifth century BCE.⁵ And as set forth at the beginning of his work, the historian endeavored to preserve the memory of the past to discern the causes of war between the Greeks and the Persians.⁶ His perception of these causes was broad, and he believed that history tended to repeat itself on the basis of predictable human behavior. Having lived during the heyday of Attic tragedy, Herodotus was captivated by matters of human fate and fortune. In particular, he embraced the concept of Nemesis – the karmic reversal of fate – and so believed that no person can enjoy perpetual success. His staunch faith in Athenian democracy further led him to adopt the now common credo that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Such thematic considerations skewed Herodotus' portrayal of the Persian kings, whose seemingly limitless power and ambition led them to constantly test the boundaries of their good luck. Herodotus' basic character arc for each Persian king, including Cyrus, involves the transformation of an idealistic young man or a “first

among equals” into a paranoid despot, who ultimately suffers misfortune due to his own hubris. Exactly how far Herodotus stretched the truth or fabricated details to maintain this theme is unknown, but he clearly did so on several occasions.

Like other Greek writers, Herodotus allowed his own cultural biases to color his narrative. He felt a measure of animosity toward the Persians, whose attempts to conquer mainland Greece he interpreted as an affront to the natural order of the world, whereby the Persian sphere of influence was limited to Asia, just as the Greek sphere of influence was properly confined to Europe. More importantly, he regarded these infringements as emblematic of a broader contest between two diametrically opposed political systems. In his view, the Greeks valued democracy and individual liberty, whereas the Persians, according to Herodotus, were born slaves, culturally predisposed to live under absolute rule. This perceived cultural disparity manifests itself most clearly in the later books of *The Histories*, in which the Greeks and Persians are in direct military conflict. In these books, Herodotus portrays the Persians as creatures of greed and despotism, entirely incapable of comprehending the attitudes of free men who risk dangers for the sake of honor and patriotism, rather than material wealth. Finally, Herodotus was, if nothing else, a popular historian. He composed *The Histories* for the people of Athens, the primary target of Persian aggression in 480 BCE, and so tailored his portrayal of the enemy to satisfy the expectations of his readers.

Despite these shortcomings, Herodotus remains our single most reliable source. His broad-brush

summary of Median and early Persian history generally agrees with the information in the Near Eastern inscriptions, and where it differs, the discrepancies can often be explained. Furthermore, modern archaeology has proven Herodotus to have been a careful anthropologist and narrator of social and ethnographic history, both with respect to the Iranians and other peoples. The derisive appellation “Father of Lies,” which has sometimes been applied to him, is, on the balance, unfair.

A far more problematic source is Ctesias. Born around 440 BCE in the Greek colony of Cnidus in southwestern Asia Minor, Ctesias spent seventeen years in the Persian court as the personal physician to two Achaemenid emperors, Darius II and Artaxerxes II. Ctesias was thus uniquely situated to transmit the official history of the Persian Empire and claimed to have based his *Persica* on the archives of the Achaemenid kings.⁷ Composed in twenty-three books, the *Persica* traced the fortunes of three successive Eastern monarchies: the Assyrian, Median, and Persian Empires. Most of the *Persica* is now lost, save for a few fragments preserved by other writers, most notably the ninth century CE Byzantine patriarch Photius, and Nicholas of Damascus (lived 64 BCE–15 CE), the court historian of Herod the Great, who borrowed Ctesias’ account of Cyrus’ rise for his own 144-book universal history.

Despite Ctesias’ claims to have set the record straight regarding the Persians, what has survived of the *Persica* shows that he was hardly concerned with critical historical analysis. More than even Herodotus, whom Ctesias accuses of being “a liar in many places and a spinner of yarns,” the author of the *Persica* cared

to tell a good story.⁸ Like the nineteenth-century British Orientalist Sir Richard Burton, Ctesias was fixated on shocking his curious readers with tales of Eastern exoticism. Magical swords, fairy-tale monsters, and other eye-opening fancies all had a place in his narrative and were all supposedly lifted from the royal archives.⁹ Plutarch, for one, was not impressed with Ctesias' veracity, hence his scathing remark that the *Persica* contained "a perfect farrago of extravagant and incredible tales."¹⁰ Many modern scholars also pay little attention to Ctesias, except for those periods of history for which he is the only authority. Nevertheless, certain parts of his narrative on Cyrus are surprisingly consistent with the Near Eastern sources, and in rare instances, Ctesias is more accurate than Herodotus.¹² We would also do well to remember that some of the later writers who summarized or quoted from the *Persica* may have mischaracterized or embellished Ctesias' account, so his bad reputation may not be entirely deserved.

Seen through Ctesias' eyes, the world of Persian politics was dominated by jealous concubines, treacherous eunuchs, and ambitious court flunkies. The Greeks as a whole had a prurient interest in the inner workings of the Persian seraglio, as evidenced by the undue attention given the harem by other authors, including Herodotus.¹³ But only Ctesias portrayed the harem as an omnipotent political institution. Consequently, many experts feel that Ctesias basically recounted the tidbits of gossip and "tittle-tattle" that he happened to hear from the concubines and attendants who came to him for medical advice.¹⁴ Other scholars have drawn parallels between the *Persica* and ancient Iranian legends to

argue that Ctesias transmitted an authentic, albeit embellished, Persian version of Achaemenid history as recounted by minstrels and other storytellers at the courts of the kings he served.¹⁵ The argument has some merit and, if true, would largely clear Ctesias of the charge of freely fabricating the facts. However, it does little to render the *Persica* more reliable as a source for factual history.

One area in which Ctesias is generally trustworthy concerns his reporting of Persian customs, many of which he had personally observed during his long years at court. He presumably had some understanding of the Old Persian language and seems to have traveled extensively throughout western Iran. His knowledge of Iranian geography thus exceeded Herodotus', and later writers credit him with penning a detailed itinerary of the main roads of the Persian Empire between Ephesus, near the Aegean Sea, and India. Had it survived, this work likely would have served as an invaluable source on the eastern satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire. Additional works of Ctesias that contain information on the Persians include an Indian history, called the *Indica*, and a summary of the taxes levied for the Persian king's table entitled *On the Tributes of Asia*; as with the *Persica*, both works are now lost and preserved only in fragments.

Like Ctesias, Xenophon (lived 430–354 BCE) was well positioned to compose a detailed and accurate account of the Achaemenid Empire. This author belonged to an aristocratic Athenian family and, during his youth, had received philosophical training from Socrates. In 401 BCE, Xenophon became a mercenary in the pay of the Persian prince Cyrus the

Younger, the brother of King Artaxerxes II. Cyrus had organized a force of nearly fourteen thousand Greek mercenaries to support the Iranian and Anatolian troops, whom he led on a military expedition to seize the throne from his older brother. However, Cyrus was killed at the Battle of Cunaxa, a mere forty-five miles outside Babylon, and most of his men either surrendered or were dispersed. This left the Greeks stranded in the heart of the Achaemenid Empire, and Xenophon led them on their march back home. The trek carried them some seven hundred miles through the territories of hostile mountain tribes and Persian barons to the Greek colony of Sinope on the Black Sea. It was a remarkable feat that many later authors cited as the precursor to the conquering march of Alexander the Great. The entire episode afforded Xenophon an up-close glimpse of the Achaemenid Empire.

A prolific writer in his later years, Xenophon authored several histories that contain useful information on the Persians. His *Anabasis*, or “March Up-Country,” recounts the expedition of Cyrus the Younger and its aftermath and provides in-depth descriptions of Persian military practices and the territories through which Xenophon passed. Similar perspectives are offered by his Greek history, the *Hellenica*, parts of which Xenophon based on his own experiences campaigning against the Persians in Asia Minor during the first decade of the fourth century BCE. Although both books enjoyed tremendous popularity in antiquity, Xenophon’s masterpiece was considered to be the *Cyropaedia*, or “Education of Cyrus.” Despite purporting to be a simple biography of the Persian founder, the *Cyropaedia* is a complex work. According to some experts, the book represents a pure

romance that holds the distinction of being the world's first novel. Other authorities have characterized it as a work of political philosophy – the “portraiture of a just empire” according to the Latin orator Cicero.¹⁶ In this capacity, the *Cyropaedia* represents Xenophon's response to Plato's *Republic* and the treatise on kingly power penned by another of Socrates' pupils, Antisthenes, who also based his work, which is now lost, on the life and accomplishments of Cyrus the Great.¹⁷

In the *Cyropaedia*, one finds Xenophon's views on political and military leadership, as well as some genuine history unknown to other classical authors. For example, the *Cyropaedia*'s assertion that Cyrus the Great's father ruled as a king in Persia betrays Xenophon's access to an authentic Iranian source better versed in the history of the early Persians than either Herodotus or Ctesias. The book's account of the Persian conquest of Babylon also exhibits knowledge of facts otherwise known through only the Bible or cuneiform inscriptions. Xenophon presumably gathered much of his material about Cyrus from locals during his military travels through the western provinces of the Achaemenid Empire. He likely also heard a great deal about the Persian founder from those close to Cyrus the Younger. Scholars suspect that this prince justified his claim to the Persian throne by appealing to the reputation of his illustrious namesake, such that stories about Cyrus the Great were especially popular among his followers.¹⁸

The complexities of the *Cyropaedia* raise serious questions about its historical value. Xenophon's account of Cyrus' early years seems more believable than the legends recounted by Herodotus and Ctesias.

But Xenophon was familiar with the works of these authors and may have freely adapted them to suit the purposes of his own narrative, which tended to be less sensational.¹⁹ It is also manifest that Xenophon went out of his way to present Cyrus in a favorable light. For example, the *Cyropaedia* makes no reference to Cyrus' treasonous war against Astyages and, instead, has him peacefully inherit the sovereignty of the Medes from Astyages' fictional son Cyaxares. That Xenophon knew the truth seems evident from certain passages of the *Anabasis*, which mention a military conflict between the Medes and Persians that led to the political ascendancy of the latter people. Furthermore, clear resemblances exist between the *Cyropaedia's* hero and some of Xenophon's personal role models, including Socrates, Cyrus the Younger, and the Spartan king Agesilaus. It has been suggested that Xenophon modeled his ideal prince after the charismatic historical personages that he himself encountered as a sort of encomium to the latter. However, all early Greek historians were prone to fabricating speeches and other details in their narratives, and Xenophon, who regarded Cyrus as a charismatic and sagacious king, may simply have imagined the Persian founder acting in the manner of the great military leaders and political thinkers of his own day. What is certain is that the *Cyropaedia* serves as a valuable source on ancient Persian political, military, and social institutions. However, in this respect, too, the *Cyropaedia* must be treated with caution, for it contains several anachronisms due to Xenophon's projection of practices current in his own day into the time of Cyrus.

A fourth source that deserves mention here is the

Bisutun Inscription of Darius the Great (reigned 522–486 BCE), who reconquered and preserved the empire that Cyrus founded. By his own admission, Darius was a member of the Achaemenid family and a kinsman of Cyrus who ascended the throne following a series of strange events and rebellions. Darius had his portrait and *Res Gestae*, or account of things done, carved high up on the face of the Bisutun rock in central Media in 519 BCE. The text is one of the few Achaemenid inscriptions to document specific historical events and is by far the most detailed of those that do. Despite mentioning Cyrus only in passing, the Bisutun Inscription provides a wealth of information on early Iranian politics, religion, language, and ethnography. In the coming chapters, we will reference many other sources dealing with Cyrus. However, none is as important as those mentioned above, and to the extent any background information is necessary, it will be provided as we go along.

A NOTE ON THE RENDERING OF NAMES

Ancient Names

As a general rule, I have used the names of ancient peoples and places in Greek or Latin form, as these renderings are better known than the Near Eastern originals. The book thus employs “Cyrus,” the Latinized form of Greek *Kyros*, instead of Old Persian *Kurush*. I have, however, allowed for exceptions where the Greek or Latin renderings are relatively obscure and fail to capture the sound of the original name. Furthermore, I have deliberately refrained from employing the forms of ancient names commonly used in contemporary Persian (Farsi) – for instance, *Seeroos* for “Cyrus” and *Kambiz* for “Cambyzes” (*Kambujiya* in Old Persian) – as these forms are usually incorrect and traceable to faulty transliterations from the European texts, through which the Iranians became reacquainted with the history of the Median and Achaemenid eras during the past 150 years.

For key words and terms, I have provided in parentheses the original renderings in ancient Iranian, Sanskrit, Greek, Assyrian, Akkadian, or Hebrew. The most important ancient languages for purposes of this book are those belonging to the Old Iranian linguistic

family, of which only texts composed in Old Persian and Avestan are extant. Words in other Old Iranian languages, such as Median, may only be reconstructed based on transliterations and loan-words in other languages. Although Old Persian and Avestan had many words in common, a number of words are attested in only one or the other of the two languages. In providing the ancient renderings of such words, I have generally referred to the language in which the words are directly attested. Thus, some ancient words are given in their Avestan, as opposed to Old Persian, linguistic forms, because it is the Avestan form that has survived. Words that are unattested in either language but are believed to have been common to both (and possibly also to other Old Iranian tongues) have been designated as Old Iranian, without further specification.

The pronunciation of many ancient words is subject to dispute. An important case involves the Old Persian character commonly transcribed as *ça*. I have rendered it *ssa*, as in *khshassa* (“empire”), but some scholars believe that the actual pronunciation was closer to *sra*. I have not employed diacritics to distinguish between short and long vowels or to differentiate between consonants.

In paragraphs where I have provided a series of ancient words from the same language in parentheses, the language of origin is indicated only in the first parenthetical. An asterisk (*) precedes all ancient words that are not directly attested in the sources but have been reconstructed by inference. Ancient words used frequently are presented in roman font, whereas those that are seldom used appear in italics.

Modern Iranian Toponyms

Regarding modern Iranian toponyms and personal names, I have generally abstained from the common practice of using the letter “u” for a short “o” and “i” for a short “e.” This book thus has “Lorestan” as opposed to “Luristan,” “Kerman” as opposed to “Kirman,” and “Naqsh-e Rostam” instead of “Naqsh-i Rustam.” Exceptions occur in the cases of toponyms that have received formal, international recognition (for instance, “Kurdistan” instead of “Kordestan”).

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Achaemenes: Reputed founder of the Persian royal dynasty to which Cyrus II and Darius I belonged.

Ahuramazda: Chief god of Zoroastrianism, the religion preached by the prophet Zoroaster. His name meant the “Wise Lord” or “Lord Wisdom.”

Amytis: Daughter of Astyages and designated heiress to his estate. Cyrus II married her to solidify his rule over the territories formerly governed by the Medes.

Anahita: Iranian goddess of water, fertility, love, and war, whose cult was integrated into Zoroastrianism after the prophet’s death.

Ariaramnes: Son of Teispes and grandson of Achaemenes. He ruled as a petty king somewhere in the Persian homeland beginning in the second half of the seventh century BCE.

Arsames: Son of Ariaramnes and grandfather of Darius I. He relinquished his petty kingship in Persia to Cyrus II.

Artaxerxes II: Eldest son of Darius II and Parysatis and ruler of the Achaemenid Empire from 404 BCE to 358 BCE. His most notable deed, aside from quelling the insurgency of his younger brother Cyrus, involved promoting the cults of Mithra and Anahita to broaden his base of support throughout the Iranian lands.

Astyages: Maternal grandfather of Cyrus II and last

king of Media (reigned 585–550 BCE).

Atossa: Daughter of Cyrus II, most likely by the Median princess Amytis.

Bardiya: Younger son of Cyrus II, who served as viceroy of the eastern provinces during the last decade of his father's reign. The extant sources all provide that Bardiya was put to death by Cambyses II after the latter became king; however, a number of scholars have questioned the veracity of these sources.

Belshazzar: Eldest son of the Babylonian king Nabonidus. Belshazzar governed Babylonia proper during his father's ten-year stay in the Arabian city of Tema (552–543 BCE).

Cambyses I: Son of Cyrus I and father of Cyrus II. He ruled as king of Anshan from approximately 600 BCE to 559 BCE and received the hand of the Median princess Mandane in marriage.

Cambyses II: Eldest son and successor of Cyrus II. Cambyses ruled the Achaemenid Empire from 530 BCE to 522 BCE, during which he solidified Persian rule over Cyprus and the islands of the eastern Aegean and conquered Egypt and other territories in North Africa.

Cassandane: Daughter of Pharnaspes and principal wife of Cyrus II. She was the mother of Cambyses II and Bardiya.

Croesus: Lydian king (reigned 559–545 BCE) who was defeated and conquered by Cyrus II. Croesus was famous for his wealth, hence the saying, "as rich as Croesus."

Ctesias: Greek physician and historian who authored the *Persica*, or "Persian History," which is now preserved only in fragments.

Cyrus I: Son of Teispes and king of Anshan from approximately 640 BCE to 600 BCE. Most scholars identify him with the “Kurash King of Parsumash” of the Assyrian inscriptions.

Cyrus II: Founder of the Persian Empire (reigned 559–530 BCE) and the subject of this book.

Cyrus the Younger: Son of Darius II and Queen Parysatis, and royal paymaster of the author Xenophon. He is best known for attempting to seize the throne from his older brother Artaxerxes II in 401 BCE. Some scholars believe that Xenophon modeled the hero of his *Cyropaedia* partly after this prince.

Cyaxares: Father of Astyages and king of Media (reigned 625–585 BCE). Cyaxares unified the Medes and other Iranian peoples into a vast tribal empire and, in alliance with the Babylonians, toppled the Assyrian Empire. His later conquests extended to central Anatolia in the west and Khorasan in the east.

Darius I: Son of Hystaspes and ruler of the Achaemenid Empire from 522 BCE to 486 BCE. Darius rescued the empire from anarchy following the death of Cambyses II and re-established it according to the royal ideology and administrative principles formulated by Cyrus II. The Achaemenid Empire reached its height under Darius, who extended Persian rule to the Indus River in the east, the Danube River in the northwest, and beyond the Jaxartes River in Central Asia.

Deioces: Reputed founder of the Median royal dynasty to which Cyaxares and Astyages belonged. Some scholars have identified him with Daiukku, a Mannaeen lord of the late eighth century BCE

mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions.

Gaumata: Magian usurper who led a coup against Cambyses II in 522 BCE by claiming to be Bardiya. Gaumata was killed in his palace by Darius I, who immediately seized the throne. Some scholars dispute the notion that Gaumata really existed. According to them, the person Darius killed to become king was Bardiya.

Harpagus: Median nobleman related (by marriage) to Astyages. Harpagus won Cyrus the support of the Median aristocracy during the Persian rebellion and later served as an important officer in Asia Minor, where he received extensive land grants.

Herodotus: Greek historian (lived 490–425 BCE) and author of *The Histories*, which constitutes the most important narrative source on the early decades of Persian imperial rule.

Hystaspes: Son of Arsames, father of Darius I, and an important officer under Cyrus II and Cambyses II.

Kavi Vishtaspa: Patron of the prophet Zoroaster and archetypal “pious king” in the Iranian epics. He is assumed to have lived around 1000 BCE.

Khshathrita: Median lord of Kar-Kashshi in the Zagros Mountains who revolted against the Assyrians in 672 BCE. Some scholars have identified him with Phraortes, the son of Deioces and second king of the Medes according to Herodotus.

Mandane: Daughter of Astyages, wife of Cambyses I, and mother of Cyrus II.

Marduk: Traditionally, the chief deity of the Babylonian pantheon and the patron god of the city of Babylon. His cult was threatened by Nabonidus.

Mithra: Iranian god of the oath, who later became a deity of the sun. Several forms of his cult seem to

have existed at the time of Cyrus, and some of these were decidedly non-Zoroastrian.

Nabonidus: King of Babylon (reigned 556–539 BCE) whom Cyrus defeated and deposed. Unlike his predecessors, Nabonidus was an ethnic Aramaean from the northern Mesopotamian city of Harran.

Oebaras: Persian nobleman and ardent supporter of Cyrus II, who made him the satrap of Media following his victory over Astyages.

Pharnaspes: Important member of the Persian nobility and the Achaemenid clan who gave his daughter Cassandane in marriage to Cyrus. Pharnaspes was nicknamed *Thukhra*, meaning the “Red.”

Phraortes: Reportedly the son of Deioces, father of Cyaxares, and the second king of the Medes. A number of scholars have identified him with Khshathrita.

Second Isaiah: The name given to the anonymous prophet who composed verses honoring Cyrus around the time of the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. His verses were incorporated into chapters forty through fifty-five of the Book of Isaiah.

Sin: Mesopotamian moon god and favorite deity of Nabonidus, who planned to subvert Marduk’s cult in favor of Sin’s.

Teispes: Son of Achaemenes and king of several Persian tribes during the first half of the seventh century BCE. He was the first Iranian to rule over Anshan.

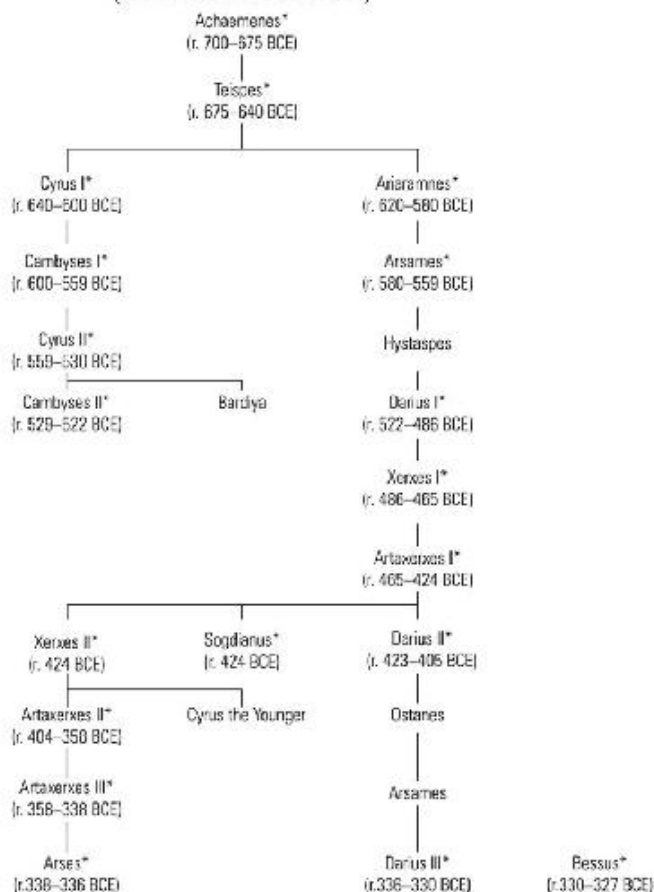
Xenophon: Athenian philosopher, general, and historian (lived 430–354 BCE), who wrote several works touching upon Persian culture and history. His *Cyropaedia*, or “Education of Cyrus,” represents

a complex literary work that purports to be a biography of Cyrus II.

Xerxes I: Son of Darius I and Atossa and ruler of the Achaemenid Empire (reigned 485–465 BCE). Xerxes is best known for his failed invasion of mainland Greece in 480 BCE; however, he executed several important internal political and religious reforms.

Zoroaster: Iranian prophet who preached a dualistic religion (Zoroastrianism) based on the veneration of Ahuramazda, the chief caretaker of the positive cosmic force of Truth, and opposition to Angra Mainyu, the devilish champion of the Lie. The exact dates and location of Zoroaster's ministry are unknown, but he likely lived in eastern Iran or Central Asia around 1000 BCE.

ACHAEMENID FAMILY TREE
(INCLUDING DATES OF REIGNS)



Notes: Asterisk (*) indicates family members who ruled as kings. Dates of reigns of kings before Cyrus II are hypothetical. Perhaps Arses and certainly Bessus ruled under the throne name "Artaxerxes." Albert a cousin of Darius III, Bessus' exact ancestry and Achaemenid affiliations are unknown.



PRELUDE

On the morning of October 29, 539 BCE, the high priest of Marduk, the lord of the gods, gazed out into the distance from the entrance of the hallowed shrine that adorned the uppermost level of the famous Etemenanki temple in Babylon. His elevated vantage point afforded him a sweeping view of the entire city, the largest in the known world. From his lofty perch, he could clearly make out the magnificent processional avenue that passed through the vaunted Ishtar Gate, the glazed blue tiles of which shimmered under the glaring Mesopotamian sun. Nabuchadnezzar II, the powerful Babylonian king who had constructed both the gate and the avenue some fifty years earlier, had called the street the *Aibur-shabu*, the “Enemy Shall Never Pass.”

It was an ironic name, for on this day a great crowd lined the sides of the avenue, all the way from the Ishtar Gate to the city’s outer walls. Even the rooftops and balconies of the overlooking buildings seemed to bustle with activity. The din of the crowd was audible from the towering heights of the temple, and it seemed as if all Babylon had turned out to finally catch a glimpse of the mighty conqueror about

whom they had heard so much. Cyrus the Achaemenid was no Mesopotamian but a Persian, and he was to arrive with the bulk of his army, a superb fighting force, drawn from nations so far-flung that the names of many of the tribes were unknown even to the most learned Babylonians. Yet, the city's inhabitants did not view his approach with the same dread that typically accompanied the arrival of an invading army. Cyrus would enter the city not as a conqueror but as a liberator and friend.

The high priest of Marduk and other important Babylonian dignitaries had played an integral role in building public anticipation for the Persian's arrival. They had heard the complaints of the people, who felt oppressed under the reign of the aged and eccentric Nabonidus. During the early years of Nabonidus' reign, things had run smoothly, as he had paid lip-service to the traditional gods of the pantheon and protected the country's borders. But as he grew more confident in his power, Nabonidus began to unfurl what many considered to be a devious plot to subvert the cult of Marduk and other Babylonian deities in favor of a foreign moon god, to which he himself was personally devoted. Worse yet, Nabonidus had abandoned the imperial capital for ten long years, choosing, instead, to take up residence in the Arabian oasis of Tema. During this time, he had neglected to pay the traditional homage to Marduk as part of the all-important New Year festival in Babylon. These offenses had raised the ire of Marduk, who predictably turned his back on the country and scourged the land with famine and pestilence. The people had paid the price for Nabonidus' sins. This, at least, was the message that the high priest and his fellow

collaborators had propagated for the past few years.

Now, the reviled Nabonidus was a captive of the Persians. His army had barely offered resistance at the Battle of Opis, and he himself had fallen prisoner soon after the conqueror's advance guard first entered the city more than two weeks before. A number of Babylonians had called for Nabonidus to be put to death, but the Persian conqueror was not the sort to execute vanquished monarchs, and the high priest had already received news from the Persian camp that Nabonidus would be spared, sent to some remote eastern land to live out the rest of his days in princely exile.

When the high priest had first met the Persian king's representatives nearly fifteen years before, he had been amazed at the manner in which they spoke of Truth as a life-giving force, pitted against the malevolent impulse of the Lie. They talked about the creation and of a future moment of reckoning for all mankind, when the followers of the Lie would be purged of their sins. These ideas represented something new and different, to which the high priest had not previously been exposed, and he had even wondered aloud at that time whether such beliefs ran counter to the conqueror's averred respect for the cult of Marduk. But the Persian envoys had responded by emphasizing the similarities between their gods and the Babylonian ones and had assured him that the best way to serve Truth would be to maintain social order by preserving the integrity of Marduk and other native deities.

At the time of that meeting, Cyrus had been at war with the powerful Medes, whose horse-borne armies had instilled fear in the heart of many

Babylonians, even Nabuchadnezzar himself. The high priest had heard that the king of the Medes was Cyrus' maternal grandfather, who, on the strength of a nightmare, had tried to kill the Persian prince while the latter was still an infant. But the gods intervened and saved Cyrus. Some say that they sent a wild dog to suckle the helpless infant, who had been abandoned in the wilderness. Others maintain that they inspired a cowherd or highway robber to find the child and raise him in his hut, so that he might one day avenge himself upon his would-be murderer. Very little about Cyrus' origins seemed certain, and some merchants had recently told the high priest that the attempted murder had nothing to do with Cyrus turning against his grandfather but that the Persian prince had declared war on the Medes for the love of a woman.

What was clear to the high priest was that Cyrus enjoyed the gods' support. How else could he have toppled the Medes and every other kingdom in Asia in the short span of a few years? One by one he had subdued the rulers of the east, whose territories stretched beyond the white-capped mountains from which lapis lazuli came. The wealthy Lydian king Croesus, a longtime ally of Babylon, had lost his crown after foolishly invading Persian territory in hopes of overthrowing a mighty empire. Cyrus had even imposed tribute on the Greek islands of the western sea, something no other king had ever done. Mountains, deserts, and rivers were no obstacle to his armies, which, some said, were guided at night by a heavenly aura.

The high priest had long deemed it inevitable that the conqueror would one day set his sights on Babylon, the richest city under the sun. And this

understanding, coupled with his personal trust in the Persian's reputation for fair-dealing, had motivated him and his fellow collaborators to accept Cyrus' proposal to restore Marduk's cult in return for the Babylonian crown. The moment had now arrived for both sides to make good on their promises.

The high priest looked toward the horizon. Off in the distance, a white pall of dust appeared. As it drew nearer, he heard the steady drone of footsteps and the rumble of chariots. He summoned his attendants and hastily descended the long stairway that led to the base of the temple. He would soon greet his new master.

A Nascent People: The Arrival of the Medes and Persians in Western Iran

Soft lands breed soft men.

— Attributed to Cyrus the Great by Herodotus

Our story begins over three thousand years ago, when the Medes and Persians first arrived in the western part of the Iranian plateau – the geographical formation extending from the mountains east of Mesopotamia and Anatolia to Afghanistan and western India. Where they came from no one really knows. Most modern scholars place their original homeland somewhere in Central Asia, although alternate locations such as southern Russia and even Asia Minor have been suggested. These conclusions are primarily based not on archaeological finds but on linguistic evidence.

Iranian belongs to the greater category of Indo-European languages (representative members include Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit). Both the Indo-Europeans of Iran and the Indo-Europeans of India referred to themselves as “Aryans,” a term denoting free or noble birth. The modern nation of Iran takes its name from

the ancient word **Aryanam*, meaning “of the Aryans.” Historians believe that in the first part of the second millennium BCE the Indo-Iranians, the mutual ancestors of the Aryan settlers of India and Iran, branched off into two groups, one of which moved toward India and the other, some time later, toward Iran.

The emergence of the Medes and Persians was thus part of a much broader population movement known as the “Iranian” or “Aryan Migration.” Assuming the migration started in Central Asia, the itinerants appear to have split into three groups. One moved east, following the course of the Oxus River, and inhabited the oases located thereabouts; these were the Bactrians (Old Persian *Bakhtrish*) and Sogdians (*Suguda*). Another group, consisting of the Areians (*Haraiva*), Drangians (*Zranka*), and Arachosians (*Harahuvatish*), migrated south and occupied the lands along the present-day border of Iran and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the third group of Iranian tribes, which included the Medes and Persians, pushed westward, skirting the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains before reaching another towering range, the Zagros.

Most of the information we have on the culture of the early Iranians comes from the Avesta and the Rig Veda. The Avesta is the sacred text of the Zoroastrians. It was composed orally over the course of many years, beginning no later than the sixth century BCE and in all likelihood as much as half a millennium earlier. The Avesta consists of two sets of texts. The first and more ancient set was composed in the eastern Iranian tongue known as Old Avestan, the second set was composed in an apparently later stage

of language called Young Avestan. Young Avestan is probably the linguistic “niece” or “nephew” of Old Avestan rather than a direct descendant. The Avestan languages are close relatives but not direct predecessors or successors of Old Persian. Old Persian was spoken in southwestern Iran until the late fourth century BCE and gave rise to Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, which, in turn, developed into New Persian around the ninth century CE. The Rig Veda, on the other hand, is a collection of hymns composed in an ancient Indian language similar in structure but more distantly related to Old Avestan. The two texts differ in terms of their geographic and cultural milieus. The Rig Veda originated in northern India among the Aryan tribes that overran that region, whereas the Avesta developed somewhere in eastern Iran, following the religious reforms of the prophet Zoroaster (Avestan *Zarathushtra*).

Both the Avesta and the Rig Veda make clear that the early Iranians were nomads who depended upon animal husbandry for subsistence. Especially important to them were the cow and the horse – the cow because it provided sustenance with its milk and flesh, and the horse because it hauled the chariots in which warriors went to battle. Due to their tremendous value to society, cows and horses also represented the choicest sacrificial animals and were offered not just to the gods but also to the souls of great warriors and chieftains. The rite of the horse sacrifice was particularly important and is attested, among other places, in the archaeology of the Bronze Age Andronovo culture of Central Asia, which a number of experts have linked to the Indo-Iranians.

Iranian society featured three class divisions:

priests (Avestan *zaotar*, “he who invokes” or “he who pours libation”), warriors (*rathaeshtar*, “he who stands in a chariot”), and herdsmen (*vastar*, “pasturer”; or *vastryo fshuyant*, “he who fattens cattle in pastures”). In the earliest times, the priests served as society’s day-to-day leaders. The situation changed, however, as the military needs of society became more pressing, prompting the rise of the warrior class.¹ Despite this shift of power, the priesthood continued to play a vital role. As intermediaries between gods and men, priests presided over even the most trivial religious rites and engaged in soothsaying and other sacral tasks. The original Aryan gods were nature deities, like the sun (*Hvar*), moon (*Mah*), and sky (**Dyaosha*); as society progressed, however, additional gods, representing abstract concepts such as “the oath” (*Mithra*) and “hospitality” (*Aryaman*), were also worshipped. It is possible that already at this early stage a growing minority of Iranians followed the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster; the Zoroastrians revered Ahuramazda, the “Lord of Wisdom,” as their chief god. True to their nomadic ways, the early Iranians conceived of the cosmos as a vast tent, held in place by poles and fixings; it was beyond this astral canvas that their most powerful gods resided and to which the souls of their heroes were believed to ascend.²

Even before their migration, the Iranians were a brave and warlike people. Their military prowess derived from their unparalleled mastery of the horse; in fact, one of the earliest examples of a spoke-wheeled chariot (circa 2000 BCE), the military vehicle of nobilities throughout the ancient world, hails from a burial mound in Central Asia commonly identified with the Indo-Iranians. At first, the chariot provided

the only alternative to fighting on foot. Over time and through the use of the bronze bit, however, the Iranians learned to ride horses into battle – instead of simply yoking them to chariots – and so developed true cavalry (circa 1200–1000 BCE).³ Weapons and armor were initially made of bronze, but this material was gradually phased out with the advent of the Iron Age.

Although the archeological evidence does not show it, the Iranian migration must have been, at least in certain places, a violent affair.⁴ Then as now, the Iranian plateau was largely arid, especially in its central and eastern parts, with settlements concentrated around a relatively small number of streams and oases; because these geographic lifelines could only support limited populations, competition for resources was fierce, giving rise to brutal conflicts. The Iranians remembered their struggles against the indigenous peoples of the plateau in terms of heroic confrontations with demons. Particularly dangerous were the demons of Mazana and Varena, against which many of the great Iranian heroes fought.⁵ Thus romanticized, memories of early conflicts with aboriginal tribes became part of a legendary history dating back to Indo-Iranian times. Fragments of this “history” survive in various parts of the Avesta, Pahlavi literature, and the *Shahnameh*.

Despite their penchant for war, the Iranians did not achieve immediate conquests everywhere they went. It was one thing to overrun the thinly populated settlements and isolated fortresses that dotted the landscape of eastern Iran but an altogether different proposition to conquer the established states that existed in the western reaches of the plateau. Here,

native settlements tended to be larger and more densely populated and, therefore, better situated to withstand the incoming hordes.

In the face of such opposition, the Iranian advance slowed down considerably. Rather than storm the communities they encountered in the west, the Iranians were more often than not forced to settle in their peripheries and live alongside the natives. This coexistence did not always last, however. Like other major population movements, the Iranian migration was above all else a matter of survival linked to overpopulation or a lack of resources in the original homeland. Tribes at the forefront of the migration were constantly pushed by those behind them, such that many a native settlement that had initially staved off the Iranian hordes must have succumbed to a subsequent wave of migration. Where this second attack did not occur, the Iranian takeover tended to be more peaceful, with the Iranians slowly infiltrating the ranks of the local elites by serving as mercenaries and soldiers to their kings, much like the European barbarians who threatened Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries CE.⁶ In such instances, as in cases where they simply never seized power, the Iranians also merged with other nomadic groups that had been similarly held at bay.

What were the native tribes and kingdoms that the Iranians encountered during their trek? It is sadly impossible to draw useful conclusions about the sociopolitics or ethnography of eastern Iran before the seventh century BCE. But in the west, the picture is much clearer. Mesopotamian texts mention the kingdoms of Manna and Ellipi in Iranian Azerbaijan and northern Lorestan, respectively. South of Ellipi

lived the Kassites. This last people, called Cossaeans by the Greeks, belonged to a particularly widespread ethnic group, the name of which survives in that of the Caspian Sea and other sites across the Iranian plateau and southwestern Central Asia.⁷ More formidable than these kingdoms and tribes were the three great empires of the day: Urartu, Assyria, and Elam.

The Urartians were an agricultural people based in the highlands of Armenia near Lake Van, who at various times tried to expand into Iranian Azerbaijan. Such designs naturally put them at odds with the native Mannaeans, who, from time to time, were forced to accept Urartian rule. The Urartians were also erstwhile foes of the Assyrians, Semites from northern Mesopotamia who likewise made military excursions into western Iran.

As for Elam, it was one of the oldest and richest civilizations of the ancient world, dating back to the fourth millennium BCE. Neither Indo-Europeans nor Semites, the Elamites spoke a language closely related to the Dravidians of India and at least some of their tribes had a rather dark complexion.⁸ That Elamite territory once extended deep into the Iranian plateau is a relatively recent discovery tied to the identification of Anshan, one of the principal Elamite cities, with the site of Tal-e Malyan in the highlands of Fars, the later homeland of the Persians. Indeed, it has been suggested that *Haltamtu*, which is what the Elamites called their country, originally meant “the Highland,” and according to some, this term once denoted the entire southern half of the Iranian plateau, as far east as the Dasht-e Lut. Nevertheless, the true seat of Elamite power was the city of Susa,

located in the lowlands of present-day Khuzestan. The archaeology of this and other sites has revealed that the Elamites were in constant contact with and substantially influenced by the civilizations of Mesopotamia. Like the Babylonians, the Elamites wrote in cuneiform script, built ziggurat-style temples, and wore long, flowing robes reaching to the ankle. The two cultures remained distinct, however, and at times hostile. The stele of Hammurabi, the most famous law code of the ancient world, was discovered at Susa, where it had been deposited by victorious Elamite troops following their conquest of Babylon in the twelfth century BCE.

It was the kingdoms and empires mentioned above that stopped the main tide of Iranian migration in the west. With their migration largely at an end, the Iranians began to cultivate the lands they had occupied. Hence, agriculture, which is not even mentioned in the Old Avesta, plays a prominent role in later traditions. According to one Young Avestan text, “he who sows grain sows virtue, and promotes and nurtures the Mazda-worshipping religion with a hundred new dwelling places.”⁹ So it passed that many tribes abandoned the tent for the hut and the wagon for the plow. This change in lifestyle led to an altered perception of the cosmos. Instead of analogizing the sky to a vast nomad’s tent, the settled tribes imagined it to be made of a shiny metallic substance or stone, which encompassed the earth like the ceiling of a palace.¹⁰ Of course, not all the Iranians gave up the old way of life. Due to the lack of water and constant threat of war, nomadism persisted in many parts of the plateau. Nomadic tribes even played an important economic role by providing livestock –

necessary for transportation and farming – and military protection to the settled tribes in exchange for wares and other goods.† Indeed, the coexistence of agricultural and nomadic peoples has been a feature of life on the Iranian plateau to this day. Yet, throughout history, political power has usually belonged to those bound to the earth, and for the Medes and Persians, the leading tribes were those that dwelt in sedentary communities.¹¹

An important consequence of the societal shift toward sedentary life was the political division of the Iranian tribes. As individual groups broke off to settle new lands – territories to which they were firmly bound due to the practice of agriculture – distinct states were formed. In ascending order, the sociopolitical units of ancient Iranian civilization were the house, clan, tribe, and nation. The nascent states were organized on the level of the clan and typically consisted of nothing more than a fortified settlement and its surroundings. Warfare between these states was common, as each clan-lord strove to enrich himself at the expense of his neighbors.

These circumstances gave rise to a tumultuous period of individualism and aggression, in which the rule of might dominated and ambitious warlords sought to expand their power by staking out ever-widening territorial claims. Because these warlords glorified prowess on the battlefield above all else, scholars have referred to this chaotic period as the Iranian “heroic age.”‡ An important political-religious concept that evolved at this time involved the *Farnah*, or “Royal Glory.” This was a divine aura that, according to Iranian belief, sanctioned the rule of great warlords and guaranteed their good fortune in

heroic endeavors. It is important to note that the *Farnah* was not something that could be seized by force. Rather, it had to be bestowed, in telling fashion, by the war god, Verethragna (New Persian *Bahram*), an acolyte of the powerful deity Mithra.¹²

The Ravages of Assyria

The earliest references to the Medes and Persians occur in Assyrian texts of the ninth century BCE. In his famous Black Obelisk inscription, Shalmaneser III declares that in the twenty-fourth year of his reign (834 BCE) he led an expedition into the “land of Parsua” in the central Zagros and collected tribute from twenty-seven kings; from Parsua he moved against the Medes, whose territories he pillaged.¹³ Some twenty years later, his successor, Shamshi-Adad V, launched a campaign to the east of Elam, where he encountered the Parsamash, or Parsumash. “Parsua,” “Parsamash,” and “Parsumash” represent different Assyrian renderings of Old Iranian **Parsava*, originally meaning “rib” or “ax” but commonly applied to indicate “hero” or “champion” (that is, “one who is wide-chested” or “one who wields an ax”).¹⁴ In the seventh century BCE, this word was modified to *Parsa*, from which Greek *Persis*, Arabic *Fars*, and English *Persia* derive.



Median tribute-bearers presenting horses to the Assyrian king. The Assyrians traditionally depicted the Medes wearing animal skins over their tunics to show them as primitive.

Do the inscriptions of Shalmaneser and Shamshi-Adad attest to the migration of a single people, the Persians, from north to south along the Zagros, or do they prove that different groups of Persians were scattered across western Iran? It is difficult to say.¹⁵ On the one hand, several established states existed between Parsua and Parsamash, and it is hard to believe that the Persians could have traversed these territories without disrupting the political landscape or leaving a trace in the archaeological record.¹⁶ On the other hand, the peculiar survival of Urartian traditions in Persian art and the lasting bond between the Medes and Persians suggest that the latter people were, in fact, on the move when Shalmaneser first encountered them.¹⁷

In contrast to the Persians, the Medes, whose own ethnic name has escaped satisfactory explanation, were better established.¹⁸ They remained in the vicinity of Kurdistan for the duration of their history,

though their territories also spanned east to Ray (Old Persian *Raga*), near present-day Tehran, south to Esfahan (**Spadana*), and north toward Manna, which they began to penetrate in the eighth century BCE.

The central Zagros where the Assyrians and Iranians first crossed paths was a region of tremendous strategic importance. The mountains contained an abundance of iron, and the valleys at the foothills provided excellent pastures for horses – two essential commodities for ancient armies.⁸ Not far to the south ran the great “Khorasan Road,” as it was later called. The principal trade route between Mesopotamia and Iran, it had been used since early times to import lapis lazuli and other precious materials from Central Asia to the west. It also served as a path for conquering armies.

Historically, the inhabitants of the Zagros always looked to occupy the fertile soils and irrigable waters of Mesopotamia, the “Land between the Rivers.” Every so often they would succeed. Elamites, Gutians, Hurrians, and Kassites had each overrun Mesopotamia during the centuries preceding Assyria’s rise. The trauma of these conquests was a favorite subject of the Mesopotamian poets, whose lengthy lamentations, mourning the devastation of their civilized homeland by the uncouth “barbarian,” have survived to this day. Shalmaneser’s operations against the Medes and Persians thus constituted part of a greater effort to clear the Khorasan Road of potentially menacing tribes. They also reflected the steadfast adherence of Assyria’s kings to a powerful ideology of territorial expansion.

Ashur, the chief god of the Assyrian pantheon, delighted in war and conquest, and his royal devotees

were determined to appease him. As one Assyrian king proudly proclaimed:

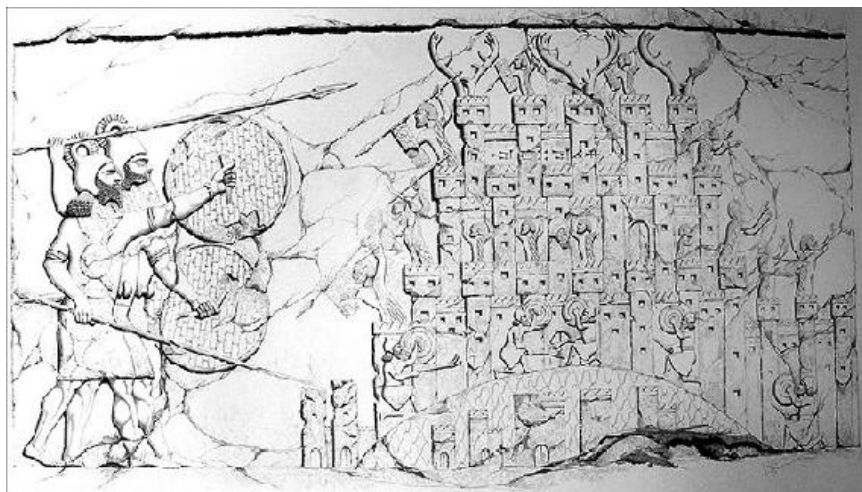
Ashur and the great gods, who have made my kingdom great, and who have bestowed might and power as a gift, commanded that I should extend the boundary of their land, and they entrusted to my hand their mighty weapons, the storm of battle. Lands, mountains, cities, and princes, the enemies of Ashur, I have brought under my sway, and have subdued their territories.¹⁹

Adad Nirari II (911–891 BCE) set the tone for Assyrian expansion when he unleashed his army against the kingdoms of northern Syria, implementing mass murder, torture, and other terror tactics to cow his enemies into submission.²⁰ Although wartime atrocities were common in the ancient world, the Assyrians took special pleasure in human suffering. In one macabre inscription, Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), who consolidated Assyrian rule as far west as the Mediterranean Sea, boasts:

I built a pillar over against the city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes . . . and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled . . . Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers. Of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living, and another of heads, and I bound their heads to posts round about the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire . . . Twenty men I captured alive and I immured them in the wall of the palace . . . The rest of the warriors I consumed with thirst in the desert of the Euphrates.²¹

The great misfortune of the early Iranians was that they were ill-prepared to cope with this vast and

predatory empire. The Iranian chieftains quarreled among themselves during conditions that demanded unity. The Iranians typically responded to Assyrian attacks by either offering up as tribute the horses the enemy so desperately craved or by retreating to the mountains with whatever cattle and personal belongings they could carry. The one advantage that the Iranians enjoyed was that they lived in a remote and rugged land, which made it difficult for the Assyrians to assert lasting control over them.



Line drawing of a lost Assyrian relief showing the siege of the Median fortress of Kishessim.

The Assyrians raided the Iranian plateau regularly throughout the eighth century BCE. Their deepest foray made it to the snow-capped slopes of Mount Bikni – the “Mountain of Lapis Lazuli,” the Assyrian name for majestic Damavand, the highest peak of the Alborz range.²² During the reign of the powerful Tiglathpileser III (reigned 747–724 BCE), the Assyrians employed a series of brutal yet methodical measures to suppress their Iranian subjects. In one district of Parsua, this king severed the thumbs of the men to

incapacitate them from military service without seriously impeding their ability to work the fields. Elsewhere, he instituted the practice of population deportation. Tiglathpileser hoped that by shuffling his subjects around he could diminish their sense of national identity and thus prevent them from rising up against him. To this end, he moved 65,000 Medes to the banks of the Diyala River in Mesopotamia, while settling tens of thousands of Aramaeans and other foreigners in western Iran.²³

How did the Iranians remember this oppression? One of their earliest myths concerned the hero Yima, the “Radiant One” (New Persian *Jamshid*), who presided over a golden age marked by the peaceful coexistence of men and beasts and the development of many fine arts. This was all brought to an end by the villainous Azhi Dahaka, the “Great Dragon,” who killed Yima and smothered the world in violence and chaos. For the early Iranians, there was no greater harbinger of doom than this demon, and his myth provided the framework against which they recounted their struggles against various foes.¶ It is therefore no surprise that Azhi Dahaka became synonymous for many years with the Assyrian Empire in Iranian lore.²⁴ In the original myth, Azhi Dahaka was a three-headed serpent with a thousand limbs; however, as he came to be associated with historical events, the minstrels changed his appearance to make him seem more human.²⁵ The transformation was never complete, though, for the minstrels ultimately turned Azhi Dahaka into a man with snakes growing from his shoulders, thus preserving the notion of him as a three-headed serpent. He was still conceived of as a half-man, half-monster when the “Assyrian” portion of

his legend evolved. The Young Avesta preserves one episode from this legendary cycle in which the “three-mouthed” fiend prays to the gods from atop a golden throne in his “accursed palace of Kvirinta,” so that he might empty the earth of men.²⁶ Kvirinta has been identified with present-day Kirind, a location in the Taq-e Girra pass between Iran and Iraq (this was one of the main military roads by which Assyrian armies entered the Iranian plateau).²⁷ The subject of Azhi Dahaka’s prayer may, perhaps, allude to the Assyrian practice of mass deportation, for, according to the legend, the villain’s minions rounded up the inhabitants of the land to feed the dragon’s ravenous mouths. This would have been a horrible fate, indeed, but the truth, as depicted in Assyrian art, was hardly better. Emaciated and despondent, the deportees were forcibly marched hundreds of miles across harsh terrain and strong currents to live as strangers in strange lands.

The decades following Tiglathpileser’s conquests saw little improvement in the condition of the Iranians. Independently of one another, the Elamites and Urartians, both of whom had suffered economically from Assyrian domination of the Khorasan Road, began stoking the fires of rebellion among the conquered tribes of the plateau. It was to settle the situation that Sargon II (reigned 722–705 BCE) lashed out against the mountain tribes in a series of brutal campaigns. In one expedition, the Assyrians captured a Mannaeian chieftain, whose name the Assyrian scribes rendered as Daiukku, and exiled him to the Syrian settlement of Hamath.²⁸ A number of scholars have identified this Daiukku with the Deioces whom Herodotus knew to be the founder of the

Median dynasty to which Astyages, Cyrus' maternal grandfather, belonged.

The next major series of encounters occurred during a lengthy war (703–691 BCE) between the Assyrians on the one side and the Babylonians and Elamites on the other. Throughout this conflict tens of thousands of Iranians from the southern Zagros participated as allies of Elam. The final battle took place on the banks of the Tigris at Halule (691 BCE), where Sennacherib and the Assyrians faced off against an Elamite army, which included “a large body of confederates – men of Parsuwash, Anshan, Pasiru, Ellipi, and the whole of Chaldea, and all the Aramaeans.”²⁹ Having provided most of the cavalry for the Elamite army, the Persians played an especially vital role, but it was all for naught.³⁰ Although both sides claimed victory, the ultimate triumph rested with Assyria. In gaudy fashion, the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) declared of his Elamite adversaries: “The chilling terror of my battle overcame them, they let their dung go into their chariots, they ran off alone, they fled from their land.”³¹ Left to its fate, Babylon fell to the Assyrians some two years later. Much to the horror of his own officers, Sennacherib ordered the sacred city sacked, its temples demolished, and its people put to the sword. So thorough was the massacre that, as Sennacherib says, there was “no one left to bury the dead.”³²

Settlement in Parsa

For the Persians, there was a silver lining to the

defeat suffered on the banks of the Tigris. Throughout the second millennium BCE, Elamite rulers had used the title “King of Anshan and Susa” to denote their realm. Historically, these were the two main regions of Elamite civilization, but a partitioning seems to have occurred by the early seventh century BCE, as demonstrated in Sennacherib’s inscriptions, which refer to the people of Anshan as allies, and not subjects, of the Elamite kings of Susa. According to some scholars, this division had to do with climatic changes that forced the inhabitants of the Elamite highlands to abandon their agricultural settlements and adopt a pastoral existence, which, in turn, made control of the region both arduous and economically impractical. Nevertheless, other scholars contend that the Elamite divide resulted from the inroads of Persian tribes that had been massing on the borders of Elam for several decades.³³ The truth likely involved both factors, for by the turn of the sixth century BCE, the Persians appear to have occupied the entire region east of present-day Khuzestan. The internal difficulties that plagued Elam in the aftermath of Sennacherib’s victory undoubtedly hastened the process.



Remnant of an Elamite relief from Naqsh-e Rostam that was carved over during the Sasanid period. The carving is located near the tombs of Darius I and his successors. After migrating to southwestern Iran, the Persians attached significance to places that the Elamites had previously deemed holy.

In the first book of *The Histories*, Herodotus lists ten tribes that, according to his sources, constituted the Persian nation: the Pasargadae, Maspaii, Maraphii, Panthialaei, Derusiaei, Germanii, Dai, Mardi, Dropici, and Sagartii.³⁴ Xenophon, who wrote a hundred years later, provides that there were twelve tribes, and although he did not name any, a subsequent author, Strabo of Amasia (63 BCE–24 CE), mentions two tribes that do not appear in Herodotus' list: the Cyrtians and Patischorians.³⁵

Not all these tribes can truly be called "Persian." The classical authors wrote after the Persians had

already stamped their ethnic identity upon most of the inhabitants of southwestern Iran, and for much of the seventh century BCE, ethnic distinctions that later generations forgot must have existed between the so-called “Persian” tribes, some of which had yet to enter the scene. Thus, the Dai and Dropici were steppe nomads who probably settled in Persia during the sixth century BCE. The Sagartii (Old Persian *Asagarta*, “Horse-Herders” or “Horse-Tamers”) seem to have been more closely affiliated with the Medes, as their annual migration spanned the southern fringes of the Dasht-e Kavir, where they wintered, to the Median Zagros in the summer.³⁶ The Germanii (*Karmana*), or Carmanians as they were also called, were the Iranian inhabitants of Kerman and may or may not have been a distinct nation.³⁷ The Mardians and Cyrtians were brigands and possibly pre-Iranian (or even pre-Indo-European) peoples that had migrated westward across the Iranian plateau centuries before the Medes and Persians, who absorbed some of their clans.³⁸ It has been speculated that the majority of Mardians and Cyrtians spoke Median dialects by the seventh century BCE, and the name of the Cyrtians has been linked to that of the Kurds.³⁹ The Mardians were heavily concentrated near the borders of Khuzestan and the Persian Gulf, whereas the Cyrtians inhabited the northernmost foothills of the Bakhtiari Mountains in Lorestan.⁴⁰

The Panthialaei are an interesting case. Their name seems characteristically eastern Iranian on account of the letter “l,” which was foreign to Old Persian, and recalls the appellation of the Panchalas, or “Five Clans,” of the Indo-Aryan epics.⁴¹ They were perhaps a late arrival that had trekked to the Zagros

on the heels of the Medes and Persians, only to join forces with the latter either immediately before or after they had settled in Anshan. If modern Fahliyun reflects ancient “Panthialaei,” then this tribe must have dwelt in the southwestern corner of the Marv Dasht, along the main road to Susa.⁴² However, the name “Panthialaei” may also be sought in Latin Panthyene, present-day Sirjan, located farther east in Kerman; members of the same tribe may have settled both areas more or less simultaneously.⁴³ In this connection, it should be noted that the pattern of tribal settlements was generally not as orderly as one would expect, since some of the clans that made up each tribe occasionally broke off on their own.

As to the tribes that formed the core of the Persian nation, the lands they settled may be ascertained with reasonable confidence.⁴⁴ The Pasargadae occupied the Marv Dasht, the Dasht-e Morghab, and the surrounding valleys, that is, the future heartland of the Persian Empire.⁴⁵ The Maspians seem to have been located farther to the west of the Pasargadae, along the eastern border of Khuzestan, while the Maraphians must have resided between the two.⁴⁶ The Derusiaei, or “Long-Lived Ones” (Old Persian **Daru-jiva*), occupied the plains of Fasa and Darab to the south of Sirjan but still east of the Marv Dasht. And on the basis of their name, the Patischorians (*Patishuvarish*), the “Dwellers of the Sunny-Side of the Mountain,” should have been located near the tallest peak of the Zagros, Zard Kuh (the “Yellow Mountain”), in what is now Bakhtiari territory.⁴⁷

Though factious, the core tribes carried the name of their nation everywhere they went and, by forging

alliances with the various peoples they encountered, caused the entire territory from the foothills of Khuzestan to the plains of Kerman to be known in relatively short order as Parsa, or Persia. Its borders were somewhat farther flung than those of medieval or modern Fars.

Many aboriginal peoples continued to live in this land. Roaming its eastern marches were tribes of camel-driving Utians (Old Persian *Yautiya*), among whom figured the Baluchis, or “Loud-Speaking Ones” (**Bardavachiya*), so named on account of their harsh and unpoetic language.⁴⁸ The ubiquitous Elamites continued to exert a profound influence on both the material culture and political development of the Persians. Recent studies indicate a significant degree of acculturation between Persians and Elamites in the Zagros highlands during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. Such findings should not surprise us, for both peoples were apparently pastoralists at the time and the commingling of different nomadic groups is well-attested in the history of southwestern Iran. ** However, as the royal inscriptions of the fifth century BCE demonstrate, many a future king would emphasize that he was not just a “Persian, son of a Persian” but also “an Aryan, of Aryan lineage.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Assyrian letters from the mid-seventh century BCE allude to Persian raids on Elamite settlements, so although they may have been allies against the Assyrians, relations between the Persians and Elamites were not always peaceful.⁵⁰ The virtual absence of Elamite loan-words from the Old Persian language also suggests that a significant degree of ethnic separation existed at the highest levels of Persian and Elamite society in parts of the country.

Such separation was presumably more common in central and eastern Parsa, where the Elamite presence was less prominent than in the west.⁵¹ Within the former areas, the intermingling of Persians and Elamites was probably limited to the non-aristocratic classes. Such a pattern of ethnic assimilation finds a parallel in the ethnology of the present-day Lurs of the central Zagros. Based on physiological features and other evidence, lower class Lurs are deemed to have descended from the indigenous Cossaeans, whereas “the high-class clannish Lurs must be descendants of Aryan immigrants.”⁵²

The Persians interestingly called all the Elamites *Huvja*.⁵³ This was actually the name of only one Elamite tribe, the Uxians, who occupied the mountains of western Khuzestan. Ostensibly, the Persians applied the Uxian name to the entire population, because the Uxians were the first Elamites they encountered – a further indication that the Persians, or at least an important group of them, entered Parsa from the northwest.

As to who may have led them on this trek, the only name to reach posterity is that of Achaemenes (Old Persian *Hakhamanish*, “Having a Friendly Mind”). Whether he was an actual historical figure is unclear; the surviving accounts of him certainly all smack of myth. According to the famous philosopher Plato, Achaemenes was the grandson of Zeus; Aelian, a second-century Latin author of miscellaneous anecdotes, provides that he was an ancient hero who had been nurtured by an eagle, for which reason the Persian royal banner was emblazoned with the golden image of that bird.⁵⁴ But important persons in the ancient world often had fantastic stories told about

them, so these anecdotes hardly discount his historicity. What is clear is that the Persians held Achaemenes in high regard and attached a certain mystique to his name. In his famous Bisutun Inscription, Darius I, who himself may have had only a hazy notion of when this legendary hero supposedly lived, insinuates, but does not explicitly declare, that Achaemenes was a “king”; this seems reasonable, especially if we consider that this kingship was really just the leadership of one or more tribes, including the Pasargadae, to which he reputedly belonged.⁵⁵ Moreover, based on the absence of any reference to the location of Achaemenes’ kingdom in the extant cuneiform documents, it would appear that he, like Moses, never lived to see his people settle their new homeland.

But those of Achaemenes’ progeny to traverse the whole of Parsa would have found it to be divided into different geographic and climatic “stages.”⁵⁶ Then, as now, the coastal region along the Gulf was “burning hot, sandy, and stinted of fruits except dates.”⁵⁷ In later times, parts of the coast, as well as the islands beyond, served as colonies for political prisoners and lepers.⁵⁸ Farther inland and higher up, a narrow and more livable intermediate zone possessed clear lakes and rivers, as well as green pastures that were excellent for rearing cattle and other stock. Game birds and wild animals, such as the elusive Persian leopard, a favorite quarry of the ancient huntsmen, also abounded here. Beyond this zone lay a cold and wintry third stage along the highest range of the mountain barrier. Tortuous, rocky defiles, some almost impassable due to dense forests of oak and cypress trees, linked Parsa to the barren interior of the

plateau and the Elamite lowlands.

As always, geography and climate dictated the pattern of human settlement. The majority of towns and cities, never numerous but especially scarce during the period in which the Persians arrived, were situated along the temperate strips on either side of the central mountain barrier; the harsher inland regions were predominantly inhabited by pastoral peoples who lived in nomadic camps, scattered villages, or caves.⁵⁹ All in all, Parsa was a rough country, stingy in its offerings.

Yet, the Persians developed such an attachment to their new homeland that they soon spoke of it in utopic terms. Several Old Persian inscriptions describe Parsa as a land “that is pure, possessed of good horses, possessed of good men.”⁶⁰ This attachment continued even after the Persians conquered a vast empire for themselves under Cyrus, who seems to have recognized the importance of living in Parsa to their eventual rise to power. This we know from the anecdote with which Herodotus closes out *The Histories*:

After Cyrus had mastered all of Asia, some of his nobles made a curious proposal.

“Since,” they said, “God has given empire to the Persians, and among individuals to you, Cyrus, by your conquest of Astyages, let us leave this small and barren country of ours and take possession of a better. There are plenty to choose from – some near, some further off; if we take one of them, we shall be admired more than ever. It is the natural thing for a sovereign people to do; and when will there be a better opportunity than now, when we are masters of many nations and all Asia?”

Cyrus did not think much of this suggestion; he replied that they might act upon it if they pleased, but added the warning that, if they did so, they must prepare themselves to rule no

longer, but to be ruled by others. “Soft lands,” said Cyrus, “breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruit and good soldiers, too.” The Persians had to admit that this was true and that Cyrus was wiser than they; so they left him and chose rather to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate rich plains and be subject to others.⁶¹

† Nomadism and tribalism are not identical concepts. A tribe is any hierarchical social group bound together by common ancestry. Tribes could be either nomadic or sedentary, and their material culture could range from being fairly simple to quite sophisticated.

‡ By comparison, the ancient Greeks experienced their own heroic age in the centuries following the migration of the Dorian tribes to mainland Greece. The Trojan War, the journeys of Heracles, and other well-known Greek myths all stem from the destructive raids that rocked Greece during this period.

§ Horses were particularly important during the early centuries of the first millennium BCE due to the increased reliance of ancient Near Eastern armies on true cavalry as opposed to chariots. Quicker and more maneuverable than the delicate and hard-to-build chariot, a single rider on a horse could inflict more damage at less cost than any other type of soldier. Unfortunately for the Assyrians, the hot sands and densely vegetated river valleys of Mesopotamia could not support large populations of equines. These had to be imported from mountainous areas abroad, and for many years, the greatest horse lord of the Near East was the king of Urartu. It was to keep up with this old rival, and also to gain a decisive edge over the militarily less-advanced kingdoms of the Levant, that the Assyrians made a serious effort to increase their supply of warhorses.

¶ The association of hostile countries with mythical dragons was a common feature of folk history during this period and is attested in the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 74:14 alludes to the kingdom of Egypt as Leviathan, the serpentine sea monster of Hebrew myth.

** This is evidenced by the more recent Qashqa’i confederation, which includes clans of Iranian, Turkish, and Arab descent.

The March of Empires: Assyrians, Scythians, and Medes

We sacrifice unto Mithra, the Lord of Wide Pastures, who is truth-speaking, a chief in assemblies, with a thousand ears, well-shapen, with ten thousand eyes, high, with full knowledge, strong, sleepless, and ever awake; to whom the chiefs of nations offer up sacrifice as they go to the field against havocking hosts, against enemies coming in battle array, in the strife of conflicting nations.

—Avestan Hymn to Mithra

To the inhabitants of the ancient Near East, divine retribution was not a matter of eternal damnation, for they believed that all souls, no matter how pure or evil, ultimately descended into a bleak and cavernous netherworld. Instead, the anger of the gods was a reality that manifested itself in this world, sometimes many years after the initial offense. So the Book of Exodus has Yahweh declare: “I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth

generation of those who reject me.”¹ Old Testament notions of justice derived from Sumerian and Babylonian traditions. The old talion required “an eye for an eye,” and many who had witnessed Sennacherib destroy Babylon’s holy temples must have believed that mighty Assyria would one day pay the price.

Then again, the rise and fall of empires was a passion play that had been staged many times already during the lengthy history of the Near East. Whereas Greek city-states could feud for decades over a stretch of farmland, warfare in the Near East took place on a much larger, and deadlier, scale. Chaldean priests, the most famous stargazers of antiquity, even associated political upheavals with specific astronomical events: “When Jupiter has culminated and passed Regulus . . . there will be war, and the enemy will come and seize the throne, [and] the land will be ravaged twice.”²

Assyria, the greatest destroyer of nations the world had yet seen, possessed the most sophisticated civilization of its time. The various chieftains of the Zagros observed this once a year, when they bore their tribute to Nineveh, the imperial capital. Built on the blood and spoils of Ashur’s enemies, Nineveh housed a wondrous complex of palaces, temples, and archives. Sennacherib, who added greatly to the city’s prestige (in no small part because of his plunder of Babylon), declared: “Thereon I had them build a palace of ivory, maple, boxwood, mulberry, cedar, cypress, spruce, and pistachio, the ‘Palace Without a Rival,’ for my royal abode. Beams of cedar, the product of Mount Amanus, which they dragged with difficulty out of those distant mountains, I stretched across their ceilings. Great door-leaves of cypress,

whose odor is pleasant as they are opened and closed, I bound with a band of shining copper and set them up in their doors . . . Eight [colossal] lions, open at the knee, advancing, constructed out of 11,400 talents of shining bronze, of the workmanship of the god Nin-gal, and full of splendor, together with two colossal pillars whose copper work came to 6,000 talents, and two great cedar pillars, which I placed upon the [colossal] lions, I set up as posts to support their doors.”³

The beautification of Nineveh involved more than just the construction of impressive buildings, however. It required the total transformation of the local landscape. To make room for the sprawling metropolis, which spanned some one thousand eight hundred acres and housed over one hundred fifty thousand inhabitants, Sennacherib’s engineers diverted the nearby Khosr River. To ensure that the local population had a steady supply of potable water, Sennacherib ordered the construction of an elaborate system of canals and aqueducts that extended for some sixty miles from the Kurdish mountains.⁴ Some of this water was diverted through the use of the water-screw, an Assyrian invention, to allow Sennacherib and his nobles to plant lavish gardens on the roof-tops of their palaces. The ancient Greeks marveled at such feats of engineering, which were later employed on a much larger scale to create the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the original Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

But if Nineveh represented the triumph of man over nature, it also signaled the ability of man to impose his will upon his fellow man. Assyrian imperial policy, the final arbiter and executor of

which was the king, was devised by a tight circle of nobles, merchants, and priests who resided in the imperial capital. This “small clique of men” – as Igor Diakonoff has called them – established a first-rate bureaucracy to facilitate their rule, and this too was on constant display.⁵ Whereas Iranian clan-lords typically selected a few trusted soldiers to serve as their retainers, the Assyrian court consisted of trained officials who administered the various agencies that ran the empire (for example, the tax collector’s office, secret intelligence service, army, court chancery, temple chanceries). The king himself was rarely seen, and on those occasions when he made an appearance, he came across more like a god than a man. This was by design: Mesopotamian kings had originally ruled as deities and, even in the Assyrian era, great care was taken to set the monarch apart from his subjects. He only held audience from behind a screened canopy, and with the exception of a few confidants, those who addressed him did so in formulaic terms, hailing him as the “Mighty King” and the “King of the Four Quarters of the Universe.”⁶

His court, too, followed a rigid and complex protocol aimed at impressing those fortunate enough to receive an audience. Access to the monarch’s throne room was only available through a long hallway decorated with images of war, conquest, and tribute – the bases of Assyrian power. Once inside, an array of ushers and dignitaries was needed to facilitate the meeting. Part of the court’s splendor was the diversity of its constituents, and during the empire’s glory days, the court teemed with magicians, prophets, and scholars. Among the last group of individuals, the philosopher Ahikar, a fixture at Sennacherib’s court,

was recognized in biblical and classical literature as a great sage.⁷ The lord of Nineveh was a very different ruler from the adventuring warrior chieftains of western Iran at this time. He dined hundreds of people at his table every night. Those of his subjects admitted into his presence had to prostrate at his feet, and his writ traveled swiftly along roads hewn through mountain and forest. His numerous spies scoured the land, and everywhere at the ready stood his soldiers, members of the most highly trained and well-organized army the world had yet seen. More so than any of his predecessors, the Assyrian king treated imperial governance as a fine art. The vast political and military apparatus he commanded was unprecedented in its complexity and held his far-flung empire together. In this, as in the more ostentatious and superficial aspects of his dominion, there was something seductive and intriguing. So though hated by his foreign subjects at whose expense his power derived, the Assyrian king was also the object of their admiration and awe.

To effectively stand up to Assyrian might, the Iranians had to advance their own society. It was the Medes who began to do this during the decades while their Persian cousins were settling in Parsa, and the eventual overthrow of the Assyrian Empire was what ultimately set the stage for Cyrus' rise.

Early Movements toward Median Unification

According to Herodotus, the transformation of Median society from one divided between multiple

warlords into a unified kingdom after the Assyrian model occurred at the turn of the seventh century BCE.⁸ The story goes that the man responsible for the change was a certain Deioces (Old Persian **Dahyuka*), the son of Phraortes (*Fravartish*). Deioces started out as the judge of a small village and earned a reputation for fair dealing during a period of extreme lawlessness. As the news of his justice spread, the inhabitants of other villages approached him with their cases, which he reluctantly agreed to hear. His court soon became the sole judicial authority in all Media and established order throughout the land. He then made a calculated move and resigned from office. His sudden resignation prompted the Medes, who found the expected regression toward anarchy intolerable, to act. The Median lords organized a great assembly where they proposed to establish a monarchy with Deioces as their king. Deioces immediately agreed and as his first sovereign act ordered the Medes to build him a worthy palace from which he could rule at Ecbatana (*Hamgmatana*, modern Hamadan). He next instituted the ceremony of royalty to present himself as “of a different order from mere men.”⁹ After a reign of fifty-three years, Deioces died, having cunningly united the Medes into a single nation.

Herodotus’ legend, though remarkable in its elaboration of how monarchies are formed, does not reflect actual events. Assyrian texts mention a Mannaeen lord named Deioces (Assyrian *Daiukku*) who machinated against the Assyrians toward the end of the eighth century BCE.[†] This Deioces may have been a Mede, but he was hardly the nation-builder described by Herodotus. Sargon II had him and his

family exiled to Syrian Hamath in 715 BCE as punishment for his treasonous dealings. Indeed, Herodotus' legend seems to wrongly compress into the short span of fifty-three years Media's lengthy political transition from a mishmash of tribal states to an all-encompassing monarchy. The actual process took three times longer to complete.

The process of Median unification was well underway, however, when Sennacherib was killed by his two sons in 681 BCE. The Medes living along the western reaches of the Khorasan Road had endured several decades of Assyrian rule, as a result of which they had come to rely upon the great empire for their economic survival. Assyria was dedicated to the safe flow of traffic along the Khorasan Road, and this meant that the Zagros tribes had to abandon their old practice of raiding treasure-laden caravans and turn to more conventional methods of commerce. Toward the end of the eighth century BCE the Medes accrued much wealth by breeding horses and two-humped Bactrian camels for the Assyrians and their Mesopotamian subjects. They also benefited by serving as middlemen in the trade between Assyria and eastern Iran.¹⁰ Several Median cities profited greatly from the massive increase of trade that Assyrian rule made possible. The inhabitants of these cities came to appreciate the benefits of centralized government over the chaos of the heroic age, and the petty chieftains who ruled them began to set aside their differences for the common good.¹¹

The tendency to band together was further enhanced by a new series of Assyrian forays into Iranian territory. The most important of these occurred in 676 BCE, when Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's

successor, dispatched an army to “the land of the distant Medes,” in the heart of the Iranian plateau.¹² The main purpose of this campaign was to discern once and for all the true extent of Median territory, something his predecessors had failed to do. Esarhaddon’s troops marched past Damavand and the Dasht-e Kavir to Khorasan in northeastern Iran, farther than any Assyrian army had ever gone; much to their dismay, they found Medes, or tribes like Medes all along the way.

It was in the aftermath of this and other campaigns that several Median provinces revolted against Esarhaddon in 672 BCE.¹³ The leader of the insurrection was a clan-lord named Khshathrita (Assyrian *Kashtariti*, perhaps related to New Persian *Shahriyar*), who had served the Assyrians earlier as the governor of Kar-Kashshi, the “(Trading) Colony of the Kassites.”¹⁴ This stronghold was located in the heart of Median horse country, along the road between Hamadan and Kermanshah. The Medes called the surrounding district Nisaya, “the Settlement,” and it teemed with herds of exceptionally large and swift horses, renowned as the best battle mounts in the ancient world.¹⁵ For several years, Khshathrita and his horsemen trampled underfoot Assyria’s provinces in western Iran and, in alliance with the Elamites and Mannaeans, occupied certain key mountain passes leading to Mesopotamia. Khshathrita’s defeat of the army that Esarhaddon had sent to expel him prompted many Assyrian peasants to escape their taskmasters for the mountains.¹⁶ This recalls Herodotus’ statement that the Medes set the example of revolt for all of Assyria’s subjects.¹⁷ However, Khshathrita never followed up on these successes. His allies prevaricated

before he could invade Mesopotamia, and his efforts to find new support among the Chaldeans of southern Babylonia proved fruitless. He himself disappears from the historical record around 669 BCE, for reasons that remain unclear.

Who was this chieftain who rallied the Medes against the Assyrian Empire? The Bisutun Inscription mentions a Median chieftain from the late sixth century BCE named Fravartish (Phraortes), who sought to rally popular support by adopting the name “Khshathrita.” Because this chieftain also claimed to be a member of the royal dynasty founded by Deioces, a number of scholars have argued that the names “Phraortes” and “Khshathrita” were intertwined in the memory of Herodotus’ informant, such that the seventh-century BCE Khshathrita should be identified with the second Median king mentioned by Herodotus: Phraortes, the son of Deioces.¹⁸ This identification is attractive but must remain speculative in light of chronological difficulties and the etymology of the name “Khshathrita.”¹⁹ Rooted in Old Iranian *khshathra*, meaning at this time “power,” “kingdom,” or “command,” the name may have been a title, in which case it could have belonged to any member of the Deiocid house or, for that matter, an altogether unrelated prince.²⁰

Whatever the facts, Khshathrita’s uprising seems to have coincided with the consolidation of Median political power at Ecbatana.²¹ This city, if indeed identical to the Sagbat (or Sagbitu) of the Assyrian inscriptions, had enjoyed prominent standing among the Medes since the ninth century BCE.²² The settlement’s very name testifies to its historical significance. “Ecbatana” represents the Greek

rendering of Old Iranian *Hamgmatana*, or “Place of Assembly”; as the name implies the city had served for many generations as the gathering place of the Median tribes.²³ Ecbatana dominated the vast plain at the base of Mount Orontes, the “Peaked Mountain,” and its strategic location at the convergence of several trade routes, including the Khorasan Road, gave it wealth enough to serve as the capital of an ascendant new kingdom.²⁴

The Nomadic Onslaught

According to the legendary history, the greatest enemies of the Medes, Persians, and other Iranians who had settled in agricultural communities were the nomadic horse-breeding tribes of the Eurasian steppe. Whereas after the fourth century CE the majority of steppe nomads were of Turco-Mongolian descent, before that time the Eurasian steppes were mostly populated by Aryan tribes, speakers of languages very similar to those of the Medes and Persians. The Iranians knew these nomads by different names. The Avesta mentions several groups: Turanians, Sarmatians, Dahae, Hvyas (probably the Huns), and Sainus (a people otherwise known only from Bactrian inscriptions of the first century CE).²⁵ The classical authors and Near Eastern texts name a few more: Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sakas. Some cultural and religious overlaps existed between the sedentary Iranians and steppesmen; but there were stark differences, too, and these dictated the nature of their relations. The steppe nomads were more savage, and due to the scarcity of resources in their homeland,

they were constantly on the lookout for new pastures. When they invaded new lands, they did so with devastating force, sacking, pillaging, and massacring all in their way. Perhaps even more detrimental over the long term was their tendency to destroy irrigation channels, the very lifelines of sedentary civilization in the arid plains of Iran.

Herodotus, our principal authority on the nomadic invasions of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, identifies two groups of marauders: the Cimmerians and Scythians. He relates that the Scythians were forced out of their ancestral homeland across the Araxes River and into the country of the Cimmerians by another nomadic group, the Massagetae, a nation of Sakas. This resulted in the Scythians, in turn, pushing the Cimmerians out of their territories and south through the mountains and into Media and Anatolia. Both groups wrought havoc in the lands they occupied. According to Herodotus, “violence and the neglect of law led to absolute chaos,” because “apart from tribute arbitrarily imposed and forcibly exacted, they behaved like mere robbers, riding up and down the country and seizing people’s property.”²⁶

What made the nomads so difficult to repel was their incredible military prowess. Linguists have derived the ethnonym “Cimmerian” from Old Iranian **Gamira*, meaning “mobile unit,” and “Scythian” from **Skudha(t)*, meaning “to shoot (an arrow).”²⁷ As these etymologies suggest, the nomads were excellent horsemen and archers. They preferred to fight from a distance, and the ballistic range of their composite bows, which extended to between 175 and 380 yards, was unmatched.²⁸ Furthermore, their small horses

were quicker than the larger breeds of the Iranian plateau. This enabled them to employ hit-and-run tactics more effectively than their Iranian cousins in Media and elsewhere. Their favorite maneuver was the “Parthian shot,” whereby they feigned a retreat to draw the enemy out into the open and fired arrows over their shoulders as they rode away.

Herodotus states that the Scythians and Cimmerians both entered the Near East through the narrow defiles of the “Caucasus” Mountains, and a number of scholars have interpreted this statement literally to provide that the nomads rode through the famous Darband and Daryal passes located to the west of the Caspian Sea.²⁹ Willem Vogelsang, however, has demonstrated that most of the nomads entered the Near East through northeastern Iran.³⁰ Specifically, he has shown that Herodotus’ knowledge of Asian geography was limited and that, like many Greek writers, he mistakenly believed the Caucasus Mountains to extend in a straight line from the Black Sea to the Hindu Kush.³¹ Herodotus was probably also confused by the recurrence of the Iranian name “Araxes” as a designation for various rivers, including the Volga, the Aras, and the Amu Darya; indeed, the Greek historian seems to have believed that the Aras and Amu Darya, or one of its branches, comprised a single long stream.³² According to Vogelsang, this confusion caused Herodotus to transfer the scene of events that took place in northeastern Iran to the west. Other ancient sources corroborate Vogelsang’s theory. Strabo recounts that the Sakas, a nomadic group from the east, entered Armenia after first conquering Bactria, and certain Akkadian texts refer to the Sakas who remained in Central Asia as *Gamirra*, or

“Cimmerians.”³³ We should also remember that Transoxiana and the steppes to the east of the Caspian Sea have served throughout history as the main avenues for large-scale nomadic invasions of Iran.

Combining the information in the sources, we may account for three consecutive waves of nomadic itinerants that overran Media, mostly from the east. The Cimmerians constituted the first wave, the Scythians the second, and the Sakas the third. In addition to the steppe tribes themselves, each wave included hordes of fleeing or dispossessed peoples who had been driven from their homes. Thus, the tremendous impact that the nomadic invasions had on the history of Iran and the Near East can hardly be discounted. The nomads heralded significant cultural changes in the lands they occupied. Beginning in the reign of Esarhaddon’s son and successor Ashurbanipal (reigned 669–627 BCE), Mesopotamian scribes began referring to Media as “Gutium” and to its inhabitants as the “Umman Manda.” These archaic terms are first attested in the legend of the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin (2255–2219 BCE), whose kingdom was said to have been devastated by a race of half-human monsters from the east.³⁴ The monsters that destroyed Naram-Sin’s kingdom were called the “Umman Manda,” literally “The Hordes from Who Knows (Where),” and “Gutium” was the name of the eastern mountain country where they spawned. The use of these terms in connection with the Medes and their neighbors is significant not just for ideological reasons but because they demonstrate that the Assyrians no longer recognized Media as the “Land of the Medes” or, for that matter, the possession of any one nomadic group. Indeed, the Assyrians seem to have had trouble

distinguishing between the different Aryan tribes of northwestern Iran (Medes, Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sakas). This confusion had partly to do with the uniform culture of the steppe nomads – a phenomenon that also contributed to the Persians' designation of all the nomads as "Sakas" and the Greeks' similar use of the term "Scythian" – and partly with the significant degree of cultural and ethnic commingling that occurred in the wake of their arrival. For Ashurbanipal and his successors, the Umman Manda were the mixed hordes of nomads and Medes that roamed the Zagros in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.

This characterization was not far off the mark, as the nomads either deposed or married into many leading families of the Iranian aristocracy. Such political marriages were common among tribal folk, whose unity depended upon cohesive family bonds and resulted in the establishment of nomadic or quasi-nomadic aristocracies throughout Media, Bactria, and Transoxiana. An analogy may be drawn between the condition of Media at this stage and that of Iran in the aftermath of the nomadic migrations of the medieval era, when large numbers of Turks and Mongols entered the country and by dynastic unions stamped their ethnic identity upon parts of the Iranian plateau.³⁵

The effects of this commingling may be seen in the artistic depictions of the Medes and other highland peoples over time.³⁶ Early Assyrian artists generally represented the Medes wearing short sleeved tunics, knee-high boots, and headbands. This was an early form of Iranian apparel that persisted into the fifth century BCE in Sistan and other parts of the Persian

Empire.³⁷ It differed from the standard Median attire of later times, as depicted on the palace walls and tombs of the Persian kings at Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam. There the Medes appear wearing tight-fitting pants, long-sleeved jackets, *akinakes* short swords, and knobbed felt hoods with flaps covering the chin and lower mouth. This costume had evolved from the riding outfits of the invading nomads and was also adopted, with minor variations, by other northern and eastern Iranians whose territories had been overrun (for example, the Sogdians, Chorasmians, Cappadocians). The Persians, too, adopted the nomadic outfit (taken from the Medes) as their military uniform but preferred to wear the long-flowing Elamite robe for leisure, as well as on ceremonial occasions.³⁸ This was because the nomads failed to penetrate Parsa in great numbers.



Frieze from the Apadana at Persepolis depicting Median tribute-bearers bringing finely crafted vessels and a type of short sword called the *akinakes*. Note the

difference in headdresses between the first man in the delegation and the three who follow—the domed cap was more common among the sedentary Medes, whereas the nomads preferred the riding hood.

Herodotus had it on good authority that the steppe nomads lorded over the Medes for twenty-eight years, but the exact dates of their domination are unknown.³⁹ According to the Father of History, the nomadic chieftain who subjugated Media was the Scythian Madyes, the son of Protothyas, who appears in the annals of Esarhaddon as an Assyrian ally under the name Partatua.⁴⁰ The Assyrian evidence enhances our confidence in Herodotus to an extent, but Madyes could hardly have been the only nomadic prince to rule in northwestern Iran. An Assyrian inscription from 660 BCE mentions two sons of the Saka chieftain Gagi who dominated some seventy-five Median cities, while yet another text styles the Cimmerian Lygdamis (Assyrian *Dugdammi*) “King of the Umman Manda, Sakas, and Gutium.” The first inscription is particularly noteworthy, for Gagi may be the namesake of the biblical peoples of Gog and Magog, who later embodied the rapacity of the steppe nomads in Judeo-Christian and Islamic literature.⁴¹ What is clear is that the descendants of Deioces reached some sort of a *détente* with one or more of these nomadic dynasties to ensure their survival and that the nomads played a critical role in the eventual rise of the Median kingdom and the consolidation of political power at Ecbatana. Thus, when the Deiocid kings enter the full light of history in Babylonian records composed during the last quarter of the seventh century BCE, they do so first and foremost as the lords of the Umman Manda and only secondarily as Medes.

Fall of the Assyrian Empire

While the Medes were busily engaged with the nomads, twilight set upon the Assyrian Empire. The great event of Ashurbanipal's reign was the damaging civil war with Shamash-shum-ukin, the king's older brother and viceroy of Babylon. The war raged for three years (652–649 BCE), during which various neighboring countries, including Elam and Gutium, supported the pretender. In 649 BCE Ashurbanipal's army captured Babylon and subjected the city to a nightmare on par with the devastations of Sennacherib. Ashurbanipal may well have regretted the destruction, as he and his father had earlier attempted to rehabilitate the holy city. But Assyria knew no mercy when at war, and Ashurbanipal's inscriptions boast of the usual carnage.

With Babylon quashed, Ashurbanipal focused his efforts against Elam. Decades before, he had succored the Elamites by supplying them with wheat during a famine, but that was during the reign of Elam's pro-Assyrian party. Assyria's enemies had since reclaimed power, and Elam had invaded Ashurbanipal's kingdom twice before Shamash-shum-ukin's revolt. Now, Ashurbanipal seized the opportunity to end the Elamite problem once and for all. "For the distance of one month and twenty-five days I devastated the country of Elam."⁴² The Assyrians sacked and plundered Susa. They smashed its temples, mutilated the statues of its kings, dug up its cemeteries, and salted its earth. "The whole country was now without villages, livestock, or fields. I have left it for the wild donkeys, the gazelles, and the animals of the desert to

roam around at will.” Ashurbanipal may have exaggerated the scope of the destruction, for Babylonian records document diplomatic correspondence with Susa in 626 BCE, but Elam never recovered from this heavy blow.⁴³ The once-mighty kingdom fragmented and ceased to play a role in world affairs.⁴⁴ In the aftermath of Elam’s fall, a certain Kurash, the Iranian king of Parsumash, offered the nominal submission of his people and sent his eldest son, Arukku (Old Persian **Aryauka*, the “Aryan One”), to Nineveh as a hostage in order to prevent the Assyrians from devastating his country (640 BCE). More will be said of this Kurash in the next chapter.

Ashurbanipal’s conquests could have lifted Assyria to the pinnacle of power had the triumphant monarch paid more attention to the necessary task of rebuilding his war-torn empire, but he did not. His neglect in this matter is ironic, given his overall high-mindedness. One of the few ancient kings who could read and write, Ashurbanipal studied mathematics in his spare time and expanded Nineveh’s famous royal library. His refined artistic acumen even brought Assyrian art and craftsmanship to their apogee. Nevertheless, vengeance and wrath remained his strongest emotions, and our lasting image of him is not the scholar-king, but the wanton tyrant who dined beneath a tree bound with the pickled heads of his enemies. His destructive campaigns roused the enmity of his subjects and exhausted his army, while the extravagant habits of his court crippled the empire’s economy. Assyria had spread too thin. Ashurbanipal never achieved his self-professed goal of making the empire tranquil like “the smooth surface of a fine oil,” and any peace actually realized merely represented

the lull before the storm.⁴⁵

Assyria's demise came quickly enough. The power struggle that followed Ashurbanipal's death shook the empire to its foundations and fanned the flames of rebellion in almost every province. The most serious disturbance took place in the south, where the Chaldean Nabopolassar captured Babylon and threatened the rest of Mesopotamia (626 BCE). At about the same time, the Medes and the rest of the Umman Manda united under a menacing ruler, who resolved to overthrow the teetering Assyrian colossus.



Relief from Nineveh depicting Ashurbanipal sipping wine with his queen under an arbor. To the far left the head of an Elamite king hangs from a tree. According to some scholars, the seated woman is not Ashurbanipal's queen but rather the wife of the slain Elamite king.

Cyaxares (Old Persian *Huvakhshatra*), the son of Phraortes and grandson of Deioces, had been fittingly named after an epithet of the war god Verethragna.⁴⁶ The first great conqueror in Iranian history, Cyaxares displayed from the start a signal capacity for war. His first act as king was to modernize his army. Previous

Median hosts had been organized on tribal principles, with the men of each tribe or clan “jumbled together in a chaotic mass,” irrespective of weaponry.⁴⁷ Cyaxares put an end to this custom by arraying his army in separate divisions of cavalry, spearmen, and archers; he also expended royal funds to pay his soldiers regular wages and arm them with state-of-the-art equipment.⁴⁸ Although Herodotus states that Cyaxares was the first Asiatic king to execute such reforms, the Median warlord was actually adopting long-standing Assyrian practices that he had perhaps observed over the years. Cyaxares’ ultimate goal was to make the Medes a first-rate military power and, if we may trust Herodotus, to avenge the death of his father, who had fallen in battle against the Assyrians. He would succeed on both counts.

By 625 BCE, several Median dynasts, of whom Cyaxares was the most important, governed their territories as vassals of the nomadic hordes that roamed the Iranian countryside. Furthermore, although these hordes still feuded with one another, as nomads were wont to do, decades of cultural and ethnic amalgamation had bridged the gap between them and the Medes. Thus, Cyaxares who almost certainly enjoyed lofty status among the nomads, felt that he could rid himself of his troublesome overlords without resorting to open warfare. Herodotus reports that Cyaxares invited the leaders of the Scythians to a great feast, at which he made them drunk with wine and had them murdered. Although we have no reason to question the basic premise of a coup, the details of Herodotus’ story are clearly fantastic.⁴⁹ They seem to have derived from the popular legend of Kavi Husravah (New Persian *Kay Khosrow*), who, according

to the Avesta, slew the villain Frangrasyan (the embodiment of Turanian oppression) with the help of Haoma, the god of drunkenness.[‡] After his coup, Cyaxares ruled not just as a Median king but as the rightful leader of a very powerful nomadic horde.

This important development enabled Cyaxares to bind to himself the vast network of Scythian and Saka dynasts who ruled over northern and eastern Iran. It was certainly at this time, and not earlier, that the so-called “six great tribes” of the Medes – the Busae, Parateceni, Strouchates, Arizanti, Budii, and Magi – were united into a single federation.⁵⁰ Cyaxares also attached to his rule, through force or diplomacy, other Iranian peoples, including the Parthians, Hyrcanians, Sagartians, and Persians.⁵¹ Ctesias, who otherwise provides little information on the rise of the Medes, relates an interesting legend about how Parthia passed over to Median rule. He states that when the Medes approached, “the Parthians united with their Saka kinsmen” and fought the invaders for many years before submitting on account of the passionate romance between Stryangaeus, the son-in-law of the Median king, and the Saka queen Zarina.⁵² We may interpret this legend as evidence of Cyaxares’ use of marriage as a political tool.

Despite his sophisticated military reforms, history does not remember Cyaxares as a distinguished administrator. His political acumen seems to have been limited to short-term measures aimed at advancing his two main goals: war and the accumulation of plunder. He should therefore be viewed as a nomadic conqueror along the lines of Genghis Khan or Tamerlane. The only other policy Cyaxares is known to have espoused in order to

solidify his rule in the territories he conquered was to bestow upon the nomads who fought under his banner the choicest pasturelands that fell under his sway. This practice must have given his military expeditions something of the feel of nomadic migrations, but it also had the satisfying effect of inspiring the allegiance of the countless tribes – including Iranians, Turanians, and others – that scoured the Zagros in search of pastures.

Having made himself the head of a vast, if not entirely cohesive, state, Cyaxares took the offensive against the Assyrian Empire, which was by then in a serious state of decline. Around 620 BCE, a band of Scythians from eastern Anatolia had sacked and pillaged its way across Assyrian territory as far as the borders of Egypt, where the pharaoh, Psammetichus I, had secured its withdrawal by paying a heavy ransom.⁵³ Making matters worse was the continued recalcitrance of Nabopolassar, who, far from being dislodged from his Babylonian stronghold, raided the Assyrian heartland several times. Now, the Medes moved in for the kill.

In 615 BCE, Cyaxares marched his army, which included numerous contingents of Scythian and Saka cavalry, across the Zagros and into the district of Arrapha, near modern Kirkuk. The following year, he made a bold dash for Nineveh, which the effeminate Assyrian king Saracus (Sin-shar-ishkun, whom the Greeks also knew as Sardanapalus and remembered for having dressed like a woman) had left unprotected while attempting to oust the Babylonians from Tikrit. Saracus made it back in time to secure his capital, but at the heavy cost of abandoning all other major Assyrian centers along the Tigris. These Cyaxares

targeted one by one. The first to fall was Tarbishu, which the Medes took by storm. From there, they moved to Ashur, the oldest and most sacred Assyrian city, the formidable defenses of which they breached after a short siege. Ashur's inhabitants could hardly have expected any quarter, and they certainly received none. Cyaxares inflicted a wholesale massacre upon the civilian population and destroyed the beautiful temples that adorned the city. Even Nabopolassar, who had evinced nothing but animosity toward the Assyrians for more than a decade before this event, was taken aback by the scale of the devastation. Nabopolassar's own Chronicle suggests that the Medes were still perusing the ruins when he and the Babylonian army appeared on the scene. The two kings entered into an alliance, which was long remembered as a momentous event in the history of the Near East. According to legend, the agreement was cemented by a diplomatic marriage, whereby Nabopolassar's eldest son, the famous prince Nabuchadnezzar, was betrothed to the Median princess Amytis.⁵⁴ It was reportedly to appease his Median bride that Nabuchadnezzar built the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon.⁵⁵

The sources do not mention additional activity on Cyaxares' part until 612 BCE, when the Median and Babylonian armies joined forces and marched up the Tigris to besiege Saracusa at Nineveh. The allies breached the walls (perhaps by diverting the waters of the nearby Khosr River) and inflicted "a crushing defeat upon a great people."⁵⁶ Massive street fighting took place, and the invaders began firing the city before they had even secured complete control over it. Nabopolassar's Chronicle tersely states that Saracusa

died during the city's capture. However, if we are to believe the stories told by the Greeks, his death was quite elaborate. According to these tales, Saracus, who had been watching his capital go up in flames from his palace, resolved to deprive his would-be captors of the pleasure of putting him and his loved ones to death. He built a magnificent funeral pyre out of his most valuable belongings and ordered his servants to slaughter his wives and children around it. Then, after commanding his servants to fall on their swords, he set fire to the whole structure and threw himself into the flames.[§]

The victors must have spent several days plundering Nineveh, rounding up captives, and putting the remainder of the civilian population to the sword. Scholars have distinguished the handiwork of the various groups involved in the destruction of the city's temples and palaces. The Medes apparently knew what to make of the vassal treaties that their ancestors had entered into with Esarhaddon and so smashed the tablets on which they were inscribed on the palace floor.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the Elamites, who presumably participated in the war as Median allies, seem to have singled out for desecration the visages of Ashurbanipal and Sennacherib, the two kings who had done the greatest harm to their homeland.⁵⁸ The Hebrew prophet Nahum, an eyewitness to the whole affair, echoed the anger of these long-oppressed nations by describing Nineveh's fall as the "Crowning Mercy" of the Lord:

Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end to the plunder! The crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear! Piles of dead, heaps of

corpses, dead bodies without end – they stumble over the bodies! . . . “Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?” . . . She went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; lots were cast for her nobles; all her dignitaries were bound in fetters . . . All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has escaped your endless cruelty?⁵⁹

Although the fall of Nineveh decided the outcome of the war, the fighting was by no means over. The last pockets of Assyrian resistance held out for another seven years until 605 BCE. At this point, a formal partitioning of the Assyrian Empire seems to have occurred. The Medes laid claim to the regions of the north and east, and the Babylonians, who had become increasingly preoccupied with the threat posed by a resurgent Egypt, took the remainder. The Assyrian homeland had been laid waste and was to remain in a dilapidated condition for centuries to come.⁶⁰ When Xenophon passed through the region in 401 BCE, the locals had forgotten the names of Nineveh and Nimrud, as well as those of the all-powerful kings who had built them.

This loss of memory coincided with a significant demographical upheaval in the Assyrian heartland. Those Assyrians who had survived the pillaging had taken to the hills, and with their farmlands permanently destroyed, they turned to a nomadic existence. This change in lifestyle facilitated the gradual assimilation of most, but not all, of the Assyrian tribes with various nomadic groups from Iran that Cyaxares had brought in to firm up the Median presence in northern Mesopotamia. The Bisutun Inscription indicates that the Medes settled large numbers of Sagartians around Arbela, presumably as a reward for their faithful service during the war.⁶¹ It is

perhaps no surprise, then, that modern Iraqi Kurds remember their history as beginning with the overthrow of Azhi Dahaka, an event they portray as the victory of a pastoral people over a sedentary one.⁶²

The Historical Significance of the Assyrian Empire

So fell the once mighty Assyrian Empire, for nearly half a millennium the bane of civilized nations in the Near East. Assyria had been so hated that its overthrow should have marked a historical turning point; instead, it was a torch-passing. Assyrian notions of kingship, warfare, and imperial administration survived the fiery holocaust that consumed the empire's capitals, and both the Medes and the Babylonians made every effort to present themselves as the rightful heirs to the mantle of this once mighty empire. But there was an important lesson in Assyria's story about how empires should not be run, and this concerned the same violent ethos that had fueled its far-flung conquests. Assyrian brutality had instilled such animosity in the empire's foreign subjects that the latter constantly attempted to free themselves from Assyrian rule. The result was an empire too war-ravaged to fully harness the economic opportunities that may have otherwise flowed from the political unification of so many different peoples.⁶³ It would take another fifty years for a king to appear who would take this lesson to heart.

Further Median Conquests in the Caucasus and Asia Minor

After the fall of Assyria, Cyaxares pitted his forces against the kingdoms of Urartu and Manna. This assault resulted in both kingdoms exiting the historical record around 590 BCE, when the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah mentions them as subjects of the Medes.⁶⁴ The fall of Urartu led to the emergence of an Armenian kingdom in the mountains of eastern Anatolia that recognized Median suzerainty.⁶⁵

From Armenia, the conquering Medes pushed westward toward the Black Sea. They were welcomed there by wandering bands of Cimmerians and Scythians that still roamed the inland regions of Asia Minor, which had come to be known as Cappadocia (Old Persian *Katpatuka*).⁶⁶ The occupation of this region precipitated a six-year-long war with the western Anatolian kingdom of Lydia (590–585 BCE).⁶⁷ Cyaxares' dogged efforts to conquer Lydia suggest a deliberate attempt to appease the banditry of his Scythian subjects, an accommodation that must have further entrenched his power. Such control was necessary, for the terrible Umman Manda could be quite capricious, as the conclusion of the war demonstrates. Hostilities ended in the heat of battle along the banks of the Halys River (the present-day Kizil Irmak), when a solar eclipse convinced the superstitious combatants to lay down their arms. According to Herodotus, the philosopher Thales of Miletus had earlier predicted this eclipse, and modern scholars have dated it to May 28, 585 BCE, albeit with some dispute.⁶⁸ Thereupon, through the mediation of the Babylonians and Cilicians, an Anatolian people whose commercial interests had suffered as a result of the war, the Medes and Lydians finalized a treaty that

established the common border between their kingdoms along the Halys. As an additional sanction to this agreement, the Lydian King Alyattes gave his daughter Aryenis in marriage to Cyaxares' son and heir apparent, Astyages (Old Iranian **Arshtivaiga*), who seems to have served as the acting commander of the Median forces during the final years of the war.⁶⁹ It is perhaps indicative of the far-reaching impact of the nomadic invasions that this oath was sanctified in the "Scythian" manner, with each king making an incision along his forearm and kissing the wound of the other.⁷⁰

The Near East was thus divided between four great states: Media, Babylonia, Lydia, and Egypt. This delicate balance of power produced several decades of much-needed peace. Hardly a region had escaped the ravages of war during the thirty years spanning the Assyrian collapse and the final battle between Cyaxares and Alyattes. As is often the case, the peaceful times that followed the mayhem witnessed increased intellectual and commercial activity. But it was not long before the wheels of war started turning again. The Median Empire could not escape its Scythian origins, nor could Babylonia avoid internal dissent of the sort that had hastened Assyria's demise. Within two generations, each of the four great powers would fall.

† See page 14.

‡ See Appendix XVIII. For the eastern Iranian community that produced the Avesta, the Turanians were the nomadic group *par excellence*, and with the spread of Zoroastrianism, other Iranian groups gradually applied the Turanian name to all the steppe tribes, including the Sakas and Scythians. Unless otherwise noted, we will hereafter use the terms "Turan" and "Turanian" as general designations for the

Central Asian steppe nomads.

§ His kinsman, Shamash-shum-ukin, had committed suicide in the same manner when Ashurbanipal seized Babylon in 650 BCE.

A Life Shrouded in Myth: Cyrus' Origins and Early Years

Cyrus was pre-eminent among the men of his time in bravery and sagacity and the other virtues; for his father had reared him after the manner of kings and had made him zealous to emulate the highest achievements. And it was clear that he would take hold of great affairs, since he revealed an excellence beyond his years.

—Diodorus Siculus

Written history was a foreign concept to the early Iranians. According to their epics, writing was an art that men had learned from demons, and the Greek authors show that it had no place in the education of noble Iranian youths. This disdain presumably stemmed from ritualistic traditions regarding sacred oral texts such as the Avesta. Because these religious texts were composed in metrical verse and had to be memorized and rehearsed with the aid of mnemonic devices, any textual modifications would stand out and be readily detected. It was therefore believed that oral literature was less susceptible to

corruption than the written word. However, by the time of Cyrus, Iranian society had developed to the point that written records were an indispensable part of government and commerce. The Old Testament provides that the Persian kings kept detailed chronicles of their reigns, and Ctesias claims to have based his *Persica* on “Royal Parchments” in the palace archives.¹ Unfortunately, no such documents have been unearthed, and while they probably existed, the vast majority of Iranians continued to show greater deference to the spoken word. Even the monarch’s written orders were always introduced with the clause: “So says the King.”² The Iranian concept of history therefore evolved not from tedious royal chronicles but the tales told by professional minstrels and storytellers.³ To make their stories more interesting and easy to remember, these minstrels gave them a definite mythical character; they transformed historical persons into epic heroes and mundane challenges into unspeakable calamities, and they presented the protagonists’ ultimate triumph as due to the help of the gods. Thus embellished, many events of Iran’s ancient past have survived in a form that no modern scholar would consider reliable. Moreover, because the minstrels’ main task was to entertain, they were dissuaded from reciting the same story twice – a practice that gave rise to multiple divergent accounts of the same event.⁴

It did not take long before stories about Cyrus the Great were included in Iran’s vast epic history. According to Xenophon, the Persians of the fourth century BCE celebrated “in story and in song” how Cyrus “was most handsome in person, most generous of heart, most devoted to learning, and most

ambitious, so that he endured all sorts of labor and faced all sorts of danger for the sake of praise.”⁵ Several decades earlier, Herodotus had heard four different accounts of Cyrus’ birth and childhood, of which he selected the most dependable for his narrative. But what might pass as dependable history two thousand five hundred years ago does not hold water today, and Herodotus’ story is clearly legendary. The same holds true for the narrative provided by Ctesias, whose claim to have based his account on royal Persian archives has been exposed as a fraud.⁶ Disappointing though we may find the nature of these sources, the legends transmitted by Herodotus and Ctesias form the basis for much of what we know about Cyrus’ early years, so the question becomes how much history they actually hold.

The Founder Legends

The best-known Cyrus legend is presented by Herodotus.⁷ According to the Father of History, Astyages, who became king of the Medes upon Cyaxares’ death in 585 BCE, dreamt one night that his daughter, Mandane, urinated in such enormous quantities that Ecbatana was submerged. The dream frightened Astyages, who summoned the Magi, “whose business it was to interpret such things,” to signify its meaning. They informed the king that the vision foretold the future greatness of Mandane’s son. Fearing that this greatness might come at his own expense, Astyages refused to marry the girl to a powerful Mede. He gave her, instead, to a Persian named Cambyses, “a man of good family and quiet

habits” but less of a threat “than a Mede of even middle rank.” Astyages had a second dream some time later while Mandane was pregnant. This time, he saw a vine sprout from her womb and overshadow all Asia. According to the Magi, this vision corroborated the essence of the first dream and indicated that the unborn child would one day obtain mastery over Astyages’ kingdom. The prophecy disturbed Astyages, who, upon learning that Mandane had given birth to a boy, gave the child to his trusted kinsman, Harpagus, with orders to kill the infant. Harpagus was reluctant to carry out the order, because Astyages had no other offspring and he feared that, were Mandane to become queen after her father’s death, she would surely punish those involved in the infanticide. The best course of action, Harpagus reasoned, was to escape blame by having one of Astyages’ own servants kill the child. To this end, he summoned the herdsman Mitradates and instructed him to expose the infant in the wilderness and to present the corpse after the child’s death as proof of his loyalty. But the humble herdsman also wanted no part in the murder, and just as he was thinking of ways to shirk his duty, he learned that his wife, Spaco, had given birth to a stillborn boy. Mitradates wasted no time in seizing the moment. He handed Cyrus over to his wife and presented the body of his own son, wrapped in the gold swaddling cloth of the young prince, to Harpagus. Satisfied with the evidence, Harpagus reported back to Astyages that the danger to his throne had been averted, and thus, Cyrus was raised under a different name in Mitradates’ home.



Engraved gem depicting an Achaemenid lady playing the harp for her frisky dog. According to one variation of the legend recounted by Herodotus, the infant Cyrus was abandoned in the wild but rescued by a she-dog that belonged to Mandane.

For ten years, the herdsman and his wife kept Cyrus' identity a secret, until one day, while playing "king" with the other children, Cyrus had the son of a Median aristocrat named Artembares whipped for disobedience. Offended that his boy should be abused by the child of a peasant, Artembares complained to Astyages, who promptly sent for the herdsman and his son. Astyages fixed his gaze upon Cyrus and asked: "Had you – the son of a slave – the impudence to handle in this outrageous manner a boy whose father is my most distinguished subject?" Rather than cower in the presence of the king, the boy boldly replied: "Master, there was nothing wrong with what I did to him. We boys in the village – and he was with us – were playing our game, and they made me king, because they thought I was the best man to hold the office. The others obeyed me, but *he* did not; he took no notice of me – until he was punished. This is what happened; and if I deserve to suffer for it, I am ready." The response was not one of a peasant, and Astyages, who had already noted the strong resemblance

between the boy's features and his own, suspected that he was speaking to his grandson. To confirm the point, he threatened to torture Mitradates, unless the herdsman confessed how the child had come into his possession. Mitradates explained the whole story, whereupon Astyages transferred his wrath to Harpagus.

The Median king at first concealed his anger and feigned happiness that luck had prevented him from committing a heinous crime. He informed Harpagus that all was well and that he should send his son to the palace to become acquainted with Cyrus. Harpagus himself should prepare for a banquet, at which Astyages intended to celebrate Cyrus' "deliverance by a sacrifice to the gods to whom such rites belong." Relieved, Harpagus immediately returned home and instructed his son to hasten to the palace. When the boy arrived, Astyages had him "butchered, cut up into joints and cooked, roasting some, boiling the rest, and having the whole properly prepared for the table." At the banquet, Harpagus was served his son's flesh, disguised as game. When Harpagus had eaten his fill, Astyages asked him whether he had enjoyed his meal. Harpagus replied that he had, whereupon the table attendants uncovered a platter containing the boy's head, hands, and feet. Astyages then inquired whether Harpagus knew what he had eaten, to which the unlucky father declared that he did. Harpagus then received permission to bury the remains of the boy, and was in this manner punished for his disobedience. But to Cyrus, Astyages did no harm, because the Magi had determined that the young prince had already fulfilled the prophecy by playing the part of a king in the

game. So Astyages showered the boy with gifts and restored him to his true parents in Persia, where Cyrus became the bravest and most popular young man in the country.

Fragments of Ctesias' *Persica* found with minor variations mainly in the universal history of Nicholas of Damascus but also in the epitome of Photius provide an equally fanciful tale of Cyrus' origins.⁸ According to the Ctesian legend, Cyrus bore no relation to Astyages whatsoever but was the son of a Mardian brigand named Atradates and a peasant girl called Argoste. There existed at this time in Media a custom, whereby an indigent person could attach himself to the estate of a nobleman, with the understanding that, if the nobleman did not provide for him, the pauper could seek employment with another magnate. The young Cyrus invoked this custom to place himself under the care of a Median aristocrat who supervised the landscapers of Astyages' palace. Cyrus toiled in this man's service for a while, before leaving him to work for the chief of the palace custodians and, later, the head of the royal torchbearers. Cyrus eventually entered the service of Astyages' chief cupbearer Artembares. Artembares treated Cyrus kindly and introduced him to the king, who took a liking unto Cyrus and insisted that he wait upon him night and day. When Artembares died, Cyrus became a free man and inherited his master's estate. He then used his influence over Astyages to make Atradates satrap of Persia and his mother the wealthiest woman in the country. Cyrus' largesse prompted Argoste to relate to him the substance of a dream that foreshadowed his rise to power. Astyages then sent Cyrus to the land of the Kadusians to

negotiate a truce with their king. En route, a Babylonian dream teller promised Cyrus that he would receive the kingship of Asia as long as he took the first person he encountered as a companion; this happened to be the Persian Oebaras, who peddled manure in the service of a Median lord.⁹ Oebaras bore an unforgiving grudge against the Medes because of the harsh treatment that he had received, and it was not long before he and Cyrus plotted revolt and set into action the chain of events that led to Astyages' overthrow.

What can we make of these legends? Beginning with the obvious, they both feature popular literary motifs.¹⁰ Herodotus' account recalls the well-known biblical story of the infant Moses in its broad details and seems to have developed from an even earlier fable, in which Cyrus was reared by a wild dog.¹¹ Likewise, parts of Ctesias' tale appear to have been structured on the same framework as the Mesopotamian legend of Sargon of Akkad, who ruled between 2334 BCE and 2279 BCE.¹² Like Cyrus, Sargon was said to have descended from mountain tribesmen and to have achieved prominence in the court of the king whom he would later overthrow by serving first as a gardener and later as a cupbearer. The borrowing of this motif, as well as others from Iranian epics, served to aggrandize Cyrus and to legitimate him as a political leader in the eyes of the masses. ¶

We might therefore set these legends aside altogether were it not that many of the secondary characters named therein actually existed. Harpagus served Cyrus admirably during the latter's war against the Medes and led the Persian armies that conquered Ionia and the Anatolian seaboard. He almost certainly received estates in Lycia, and his descendants seem to

have lived there at least until the fourth century BCE.¹³ One of their number even seems to have been portrayed on the famous Lycian monument known as the “Harpy Tomb,” and we may suspect, based on Harpagus’ prominent role in the legend, that a descendant of his served as the ultimate source for Herodotus’ story of Cyrus’ rise.¹⁴ On the other hand, the real personage in Ctesias’ tale is the Persian Oebaras, who appears also in Herodotus’ legend of Darius’ rise to power. The actual evidence for Oebaras’ existence occurs in the Babylonian Chronicle, where he appears as “Ugbaru, Satrap of Gutium,” that is, of Media.** Because Media was the most important satrapy of the Persian Empire, the Iranian minstrels seem to have been right in making Oebaras Cyrus’ trusted confidant.

Understanding that these legends hold some truth introduces the difficult task of uncovering the actual historical details. To begin with what is certain, we know that Herodotus identified Cyrus’ father correctly, whereas Ctesias’ claim that Cyrus was the son of a Mardian brigand may be dismissed as a literary device (and not, as some scholars have supposed, a deliberate attempt to disgrace the Persian founder).¹⁵ In addition, both legends have Cyrus split his youth between Persia and Media, albeit under unbelievable pretenses. All other details are subject to dispute and must be determined through inference and the help of other sources, the most important of which, Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, provides a historical narrative that was largely constructed from a rationalized reading of these tales. Thus, the founder legends, though frustrating by themselves, provide the framework for the rest of this chapter.

Unknown to the various legendary traditions, the true origins of Cyrus' power lay in his ancestry. By overlooking the royal extraction of Cyrus' father, Herodotus exposes the strong Median bias of his informant. Other sources fortunately clarify that Cambyses was more than just a man "of good family" and that Cyrus was descended from a long line of Persian kings. The Cyrus Cylinder, a famous Akkadian text composed after the Persian conquest of Babylonia and the only Near Eastern document to detail Cyrus' ancestry beyond a single generation, presents the Persian founder as the "son of Cambyses, the Great King, King of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the Great King, King of Anshan, great-grandson of Teispes, the Great King, King of Anshan; from a family that has always exercised kingship." Little information exists about the members of this royal line. Cambyses had a reputation for being mild-mannered and gentle, and Cyrus I was an able warrior according to his own propaganda: the engraving on his seal depicts him mounted on a horse, trampling two fallen enemies, and poised to slay another with a throw of his spear.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the true soldier of the family was probably Teispes, for chronology points to him as the leader under whom the Persians conquered Anshan, presumably between 675 BCE and 650 BCE.



Line drawing of the engraving on the seal of Cyrus I.

Situated in the heart of Persia, the territory of Anshan (pronounced *Yanzhan* in Old Persian) encompassed several important agricultural plains, including the Dasht-e Bayza (surrounding the archaeological site of Tal-e Malyan), the Marv Dasht, and the Dasht-e Morghab. Teispes had subjugated other regions in southwestern Iran, too, and his successors apparently divided his estate among themselves.¹⁷ We know this from the Bisutun Inscription, which gives the following account of Darius I's genealogy:

So says Darius the King: My father is Hystaspes. Hystaspes' father is Arsames, Arsames' father is Ariaramnes, Ariaramnes' father is Teispes, Teispes' father is Achaemenes.

So says Darius the King: That is why we are called Achaemenids. From long ago have we been noble. From long ago has our family been kings.

So says Darius the King: Eight of my family were kings afore. I am the ninth. We are nine kings in double-succession [Old Persian *duvitaparanam*].¹⁸

Because Darius emphasizes his familial bond with Cyrus elsewhere in the same inscription, the Teispes of Bisutun is usually deemed to be the same person as

the one named in the Cyrus Cylinder and a common ancestor of Cyrus and Darius both. Herodotus confirms this identification, as well as Darius' claim that eight of his family had previously ruled as kings in "double-succession." Based on the usual interpretation of this term, it would seem that, after Teispes' death, two distinct Achaemenid kingdoms were established in the Persian homeland. The ancestors of Cyrus II assumed the kingship of Anshan, whereas Darius' forebears ruled in another part of Persia.

Of course, this is but one reconstruction of the early history of the Achaemenid dynasty, and various scholars have proposed different interpretations of the genealogical evidence provided by the Cyrus Cylinder and Bisutun Inscription.[†] What we do know or can reasonably surmise is that numerous kinglets ruled in Parsa and that a number of these rulers, including the ancestors of both Cyrus and Darius, bore the title "King in Persia" (Old Persian *Khshayathiya Parsaiy*).¹⁹ The Mesopotamians may have misunderstood this title to connote sovereignty over the entire Persian country, for when Cyrus I tendered tribute to Ashurbanipal in 640 BCE, the Assyrian scribes recorded his name as "Kurash, King of Parsumash (Persia)," as if he were the sole ruler of the land. That he was the leader of only a part of the country is evident from Herodotus' testimony and the archaeological record.²⁰ It is nevertheless safe to assume that Cyrus I and his descendants exercised some measure of hegemony over certain other kinglets, including Darius' branch of the Achaemenid family, and that the latter grew to resent the situation. This we may infer from the discovery of Old Persian

inscriptions composed in the names of Darius' forebears, Ariaramnes and Arsames, which hail each prince as the "Great King" and "King of Kings" of Persia. Although some scholars treat the texts as authentic, others point to several grammatical anachronisms as demonstrating that they were composed after Darius came to power (perhaps as late as the fourth century BCE), apparently for purposes of exalting these princes over Cyrus II's line.²¹

The extent of the hegemony exercised by the early Achaemenid rulers of Anshan over other Persian kinglets may be gleaned from Herodotus' statement that Cyrus II inherited the command of a tribal confederation comprised of only three Persian tribes in 559 BCE: the Pasargadae, Maspians, and Maraphians. The Pasargadae were the most prominent of the three tribes and the one from which the Achaemenid family hailed. Their sacred grounds were located in the present-day Dasht-e Morghab, and the likely Old Persian rendering of their name, **Pathragada*, has been interpreted to mean "Wielder of Heavy Clubs."²² With respect to the Maspians and Maraphians, whose territories lay to the west of the Pasargadae, their names seem to be associated with their military expertise: Greek *Maspioi* reflects Old Persian **Ma-aspa*, meaning "With Horses," and *Maraphioi* reflects Old Persian **Ma-arafya*, meaning "With Chariots."²³

Around 620 BCE, the Achaemenid dynasty of Anshan had been forced to acknowledge the supremacy of the Medes, who, under the leadership of Cyaxares, set about obtaining the allegiance of various Iranian chieftains for the war against Assyria. At first, the Median conquest had little impact upon the

internal condition of the Persian homeland. Indeed, the regional authority of the Anshanite kings must have been steadily increasing when Cambyses married Mandane, for, terrifying nightmares aside, Astyages would not have betrothed his daughter to an obscure prince. The dynastic union between the Achaemenid rulers of Anshan and the Deiocid kings of Media is mentioned by multiple classical authors and is also suggested by the Babylonian Chronicle.[‡] With Astyages' support, Cambyses must have become pre-eminent among all the regional rulers of Persia, even though he continued to rule his own confederation as a "first among equals."²⁴

As Astyages' grandson, Cyrus must have spent much time at the Median court. In fact, Herodotus asserts that Cyrus was Astyages' only male descendant, a statement that is not inconsistent with the evidence in the Bisutun Inscription.²⁵ Accordingly, Cyrus seems to have been, at least for a while, Astyages' presumptive heir, making his presence at Ecbatana a matter of political necessity.²⁶ But Astyages may well have had more sinister motives for keeping Cyrus nearby. Cambyses was king over a part of Persia, and in ancient times it was customary for rulers such as Astyages to demand that their vassals' sons be raised at the imperial court.²⁷ The reasons for this were twofold: first, it subjected the young princes to the rhetoric and propaganda of the empire's ruling class (in the case of Cyrus, the goal would have been to raise him Median); and second, it served as a guarantee of their fathers' loyalty. Because these royal hostages usually returned home only to assume the kingships held by their fathers, we may accept Ctesias' assertion that Cyrus spent the whole latter part of his

youth at Ecbatana.

Cyrus' early life may thus be divided into two stages: the first in Persia and the second in Media. In terms of absolute chronology, only a rough estimate is possible due to contradictions in the sources regarding Cyrus' birth date. According to Herodotus, Astyages had already commenced his reign when he married his daughter to Cambyses, indicating a birth date around 584 BCE. In contrast, Dinon of Colophon, who authored his own Persian history about a generation after Ctesias, maintains that Cyrus was forty years old when he became king and that he reigned for another thirty years.²⁸ As Cyrus is known to have died in 530 BCE, this would suggest that he was born in approximately 600 BCE. However, the Greeks seem to have considered Cyrus' reign as having begun with his overthrow of the Medes in 550 BCE and not his accession to the throne of Anshan nine years earlier in 559 BCE. Dinon's statement may, therefore, be interpreted to suggest a date of birth closer to 590 BCE.

Portents of Glory

That Cyrus was an impressive youth may be deduced from his later achievements. Indeed, the type of character needed to embark upon and succeed in such an exceptional career of conquest must have been long in the making. In his *Life of Alexander*, the Greek biographer Plutarch (46–120 CE) notes various details about the Macedonian conqueror's childhood that, in retrospect, should have served as portents of

his future greatness. Cyrus' early years undoubtedly featured similar episodes, and to discern what these were we must turn to the only extant source to provide a *realistic*, albeit not necessarily historical, account of Cyrus' upbringing, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

According to Xenophon, Cyrus, the eldest son of Mandane and Cambyzes, spent his early years in Persia, before moving to Media and the royal court at Ecbatana. As a child, Cyrus was extremely precocious, but as he grew older, he became more subdued and even bashful out of respect for his elders. His education in Persia consisted of the usual schooling offered to the sons of nobles and gave him an early appreciation for the hardships of war. He was always eager to learn something new and liked to engage in those activities in which he was inferior to his peers. His mother once asked him why he wished to live in Media, to which he replied that he desired to become a better horseman.²⁹ This inner drive did not manifest itself in a haughty and petulant demeanor, but rather a certain receptiveness to instruction. Xenophon relates that Cyrus always respected his instructors and that, on one occasion, he gladly recounted to his mother how he had been punished for failing to properly resolve a dispute, which arose when a tall boy, whose coat was too small for him, forcibly exchanged his own garment for the oversized coat of a shorter boy. Cyrus had initially suggested that each boy should keep the coat that best suited him, whereupon his instructor thrashed him for forgetting that his duty was to uphold justice and not fashion. The point to consider, grasped Cyrus, was who had a right to the coat: "Was he who took a thing by violence to keep it, or he who had had it made and

bought it for his own? And the master taught me that what is lawful is just and what is in the teeth of law is based on violence, and therefore, he said, the judge must always see that his verdict tallies with the law. So you see, mother, I have the whole of justice at my fingers' ends already.”³⁰ Although the story itself smacks of Socratic dialogue, we may seek behind it the memory of a prince who demonstrated a knack for learning in his earliest years.

One episode that underscores Cyrus' daring and love of adventure allegedly occurred when the prince was about twelve years old at the court of his grandfather.³¹ Until then, Astyages had only allowed Cyrus to hunt in an enclosed park, for fear that the boy might hurt himself. However, Cyrus insisted that the park lacked adventure, so Astyages agreed to let him go hunting in the wild, as long as he took the necessary precautions and heeded the instructions of his guards, who advised him to stay clear of bears, leopards, and other predators, as well as steep hills and swift currents. Cyrus promised to comply with these instructions, but the moment a deer sprang up from behind a thicket, he forgot everything he had heard and gave chase. Focused solely on the deer, Cyrus spurred his horse down a steep slope and was nearly thrown from his mount, but once he reached level ground, he brought the animal down with a throw of his spear. Cyrus had dismounted his horse to admire the kill when his guards arrived to reproach him for putting himself in harm's way. As they were speaking, a boar rushed straight toward them, whereupon Cyrus “sprang upon his horse like one possessed,” charged the animal, and felled it with a single blow. Once more, the young prince was

upbraided for his headstrong behavior, and this time, the chief of the hunting party threatened to make a report to the king. But Cyrus insisted on confessing himself and obtained Astyages' permission to distribute the game among his friends.³²

This was standard practice for Cyrus, who, according to Xenophon, routinely gave presents to his companions. For instance, when the time came for Cyrus to return from Media to Persia, Astyages lavished him with many fine gifts, including numerous horses, bejeweled cloaks, and other trinkets.³³ But instead of keeping these presents, Cyrus passed them off to his friends, who had clamored along with their families to bid the popular prince farewell. Cyrus even went so far as to make a gift of the very coat he was wearing. When the dismayed Astyages reminded him that his presents were intended for Cyrus' enjoyment, the young prince replied, "If you would have me hold my head high up when I come back to you again, let my friends keep the gifts I gave them."³⁴ Latent in this tale is Cyrus' profound understanding that his role as a prince was not just to command but to provide for those beneath him.

However, Cyrus also had a darker side. Herodotus attributes to him an unbridled ambition, which makes sense given the sweeping scope of his conquests, and an obsession with exacting revenge upon those who betrayed his trust. Xenophon seems to have been aware of these propensities, as well, despite refusing to openly acknowledge them. In one passage of the *Cyropaedia*, he has the young Cyrus linger on the battlefield, enthralled with the spectacle of devastation and the scattered bodies of his enemies.³⁵ More explicitly, Xenophon states that part of what

made Cyrus an accomplished leader was his ability to inspire dread in his followers. Even at an early age, Cyrus was apparently unafraid to use his authority to keep his subordinates in line, hence Astyages' belief that the young prince would "one day . . . prove to be a blessing to his friends and a terror to his foes."³⁶ Cyrus also seems to have been rather superstitious and a firm believer in dreams.³⁷ He could also be willful.

Many leaders, especially in the ancient world, owed their charisma in part to their physical appearance. Thus, Alexander is said to have been particularly good looking, with what Plutarch described as "melting eyes" that could capture a room.³⁸ We unfortunately have no definite portraits or detailed descriptions of Cyrus' appearance, although he too was remembered for being strikingly handsome and having a princely stature. According to Plutarch, "the Persians affect such as are hawk-nosed and think them most beautiful, because Cyrus, the most beloved of their kings, had a nose of that shape."³⁹ Assuming Plutarch to have been correct in asserting that Cyrus' features became the epitome of beauty among the Persians, the idealized portraits of kings and heroes at Persepolis may give us a sense as to his looks. We might therefore envision Cyrus with a long aquiline nose (not quite beaked), almond-shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, and full lips. His hair would have been long, perhaps covering the tips of his ears, and falling to his shoulders.⁴⁰ In his youth, he would have been clean-shaven, but as he reached the age of manhood, twenty, he would have grown a moustache and beard. Whether Persian royalty before Darius wore long beards in the Assyrian fashion is unclear, but the famous winged guardian at Pasargadae, the only well-

preserved sculpture from Cyrus' reign, sports a short beard. As for any features that directly recalled those of a hawk, it would not have been his nose but rather the intensity of his gaze; even today, Persians say that anyone with a fierce look has "the eyes of an eagle," and it is perhaps telling that, in the legend recounted by Herodotus, Cyrus unnerves Astyages with his piercing stare, leaving the Median king "unable to speak for a while."⁴¹

Nonetheless, considering the sources and what he later achieved, one gets the sense that Cyrus' most discernible attributes were his idealism and chivalry; indeed, it was his uncompromising sense of personal honor (and, no doubt, great ambition) that eventually drew him into conflict with his grandfather and sent him on the road to empire. The first century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus may not have been prophesying after the fact, then, when he wrote:

Cyrus, the son of Cambyzes and Mandane, the daughter of Astyages who was king of the Medes, was pre-eminent among the men of his time in bravery and sagacity and the other virtues; for his father had reared him after the manner of kings and had made him zealous to emulate the highest achievements. And it was clear that he would take hold of great affairs, since he revealed an excellence beyond his years.⁴²

Early Military and Political Experience

What can we say about Cyrus' early military and political experience? As Astyages' heir apparent, Cyrus would have been groomed for the succession, and Iranian royal ideology required the monarch to be proficient in many skills, such as argument in council,

the administration of justice, knowledge of religion, and so on. Most importantly, however, the king had to be a great warrior. Dinon's statement that Cyrus served as the commander of Astyages' men-at-arms thus deserves special attention.⁴³ Also interesting is a reference by Ibycus (the mid-sixth century BCE Greek lyric poet) to "Cyrus, general of the Medes."⁴⁴

As to whom Cyrus may have fought in his grandfather's service, the political situation in the east remains unknown, and while Astyages may have campaigned against such nations as the Bactrians and Chorasmians, the sources fail to mention it. In the west, the Medes are not known to have prosecuted any wars of conquest in Asia Minor following their treaty with the Lydians. On the other hand, a gradual influx of Median tribes into Azerbaijan and the Caspian littoral is known to have occurred during the reigns of Cyaxares and Astyages. This movement of tribes, which resulted in the cultural and ethnic assimilation of the northwestern corner of the Iranian plateau to the Median homeland, must have encountered staunch resistance, and Ctesias mentions an age-old feud between the Medes and Kadusians, who lived in these parts.⁴⁵ So we may cautiously accept his claim that Cyrus campaigned against the Kadusians on behalf of his grandfather.

Later sources place the notoriously hostile Kadusians between the humid mountains of Gilan and Mazandaran and the Black Sea.⁴⁶ A reminiscence of Cyrus' activity in this region may exist in Herodotus' legend, which contains a curiously detailed reference to the locale where Cyrus spent his early years: "the foothills of the mountains . . . to the north of Ecbatana in the direction of the Black Sea. Everywhere else

Media is flat, but here, south of the country of the Saspires [northern Azerbaijan], it is very high, mountainous, and thickly wooded.”⁴⁷ Further evidence of Cyrus’ expedition against the Kadusians may be sought in the classical references to the settlement of Cyropolis, the “City of Cyrus,” at the site of present-day Rasht, near the Caspian Sea.⁴⁸ It is reasonable to suppose that the Persian prince founded a fortress here to keep the Kadusians or their neighbors in check.

Campaigning in the Caspian littoral was no easy task. Geographic and climatic conditions made the region a natural haven for recalcitrant tribes. The occupants of Mazandaran have long maintained their best warriors to be the dense forests and thickets of their homeland, and the muggy jungles of Gilan have been renowned throughout history for making enemy swords rust and bowstrings rot.⁴⁹ But strong spirits are forged through hardship, and Cyrus must have honed his military skills and learned many valuable lessons about dealing with tribal peoples during his campaigns here. According to Ctesias, Cyrus was the only Median or Persian king that the Kadusians ever trusted, and the legend tellingly remembers his efforts against them as ending in a truce rather than a conquest.

It may have been in connection with his Kadusian campaigns that Cyrus marched against the Armenians and Chaldaeans of eastern Anatolia.⁵⁰ The only record of this campaign exists in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, and the purported pretext was twofold: first, the Armenian king had refused to pay tribute or supply troops to the Medes, and second, he had been suspected of aligning himself with Astyages’ enemies. These were serious

offences, which Cyrus punished by routing the Armenian army and putting the fugitive king on trial. Xenophon stresses that Cyrus had been a childhood friend of Tigranes – the eldest son of the Armenian king – who, like Cyrus, had been a royal hostage at Ecbatana; the likely historicity of Tigranes, whose name appears independently of Xenophon in the Armenian national epic, provides encouragement that the *Cyropaedia*'s account may have a factual basis, even though many of the details Xenophon offers are clearly fictional.⁵¹ According to Xenophon, Cyrus' friendship with Tigranes put his loyalty to Astyages to the test. But the Persian prince remained true to his task and interrogated the Armenian king with a series of menacing questions: "Did you once make war upon Astyages, my mother's father, and his Medes?" "Did you agree to pay tribute and furnish troops whenever he required, and promise not to fortify your dwellings?" "Why is it, then, that today you have neither brought the tribute nor sent the troops, and are building forts?" "If you have an officer and he does wrong, do you suffer him to remain in office, or do you set up another in his stead?" "And if you found him deserting to your enemies, what would you do?"⁵² When the king answered the last question by admitting that he would kill such a deserter, his fate seemed sealed. But Cyrus did not execute the traitor. Instead he declared, "I hope to make the Armenian a better friend than before," and forgave the king in return for an immediate levy of troops and money. The particulars of the trial make for good drama, and although they may have been embellished, it is quite believable that Astyages would have sent Cyrus to enforce Median rule against a recalcitrant vassal, and

that Cyrus could have resolved the situation diplomatically. Indeed, Cyrus' clemency would explain the special place that he earned in the Armenian national epic, which presents him as a hero.

According to Xenophon, Cyrus further enhanced his standing in the eyes of the Armenians by resolving their long-standing feud with the Chaldaeans concerning the possession of certain mountains overlooking the territories of both peoples. Whoever controlled these heights could terrorize the inhabitants of the surrounding valleys, and because neither side could tolerate living under the other's thumb, Cyrus proposed that the mountains be placed under the control of a neutral third party, the Medes, who would be responsible for maintaining peace in the region. To entice the Chaldaeans to accept his proposal, Cyrus reportedly invited them to join his army, an attractive offer for impoverished tribesmen who lived off plunder.

We can see already in these somewhat fictionalized accounts of his early campaigns the astute leadership and charisma that Cyrus would display in his later years. It seems safe to say that his cultural and political outlook was generally inclusive. This probably stemmed from his own mixed heritage and upbringing, which required him to reconcile within himself the different cultural and religious attributes of the Medes and Persians. Furthermore, the coexistence of Persians and Elamites in the highlands of Fars and of the Medes, Sakas, and indigenous tribes in the mountains and plains of northwestern Iran must have taught Cyrus about the merits of respecting foreign customs and pursuing policies that transcended ethnic boundaries.

He may already have contemplated making a play for the Median throne, for in both Armenia and Kadusia he took steps to attach the natives directly to himself. At a minimum, these campaigns must have prepared Cyrus for his war against Astyages by affording him greater familiarity with the workings of the Median army and valuable training for the Persian contingents that followed him from Anshan.

Cyrus' success against the Kadusians, a foe that neither Astyages nor Cyaxares could defeat, must have made him a celebrity at Ecbatana. To succeed where one's master has failed is always a dangerous proposition, and one wonders whether Cyrus' victories raised the ire of Astyages, who seems to have been suspicious of his subjects and quick to stamp out potential rivals. These traits undoubtedly contributed to the lengthy duration of his reign, thirty-five years, no small feat for a king in those days. However, Astyages was becoming increasingly aloof. During his reign, the Medes of Ecbatana began adopting the indulgent habits of Assyrian palace life, including, among other things, the institutionalization of the harem, where Astyages seems to have spent more and more of his time.⁵³ The idealistic and driven Cyrus must have scorned these practices, which in his eyes were unbecoming of a rightful king. As Shakespeare said, "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."⁵⁴

Persia and Media in the Early Sixth Century BCE

Both in Persia and in Media, Cyrus witnessed a society that was in a state of transition. From the

accounts of Herodotus and Strabo, we may deduce that by about 575 BCE the three tribes comprising Cambyses' kingdom, the Pasargadae, Maspians, and Maraphians, had become "tillers of the soil," as had the Panthialaei, Derusiaei and Patischorians, but not the Mardians, Sagartians and Cyrtians.⁵⁵ The majority of agriculturalists were small farmers, who lived in villages and grew crops on discrete plots of lands.⁵⁶ Fortified settlements and larger urban formations doubtless existed, but these seem to have paled in comparison to Mesopotamian cities.⁵⁷

Among the agricultural tribes, society was both highly stratified and militarily entrenched. According to Herodotus, one could always tell the status of two Persians by their manner of greeting. Men of equal rank kissed each other on the lips, whereas a man of slightly inferior standing bowed to his superior; when the disparity was great, such as between a peasant and the head of a clan or tribe, the peasant would prostrate himself on the ground. This custom demonstrates that the Persians, like other tribal peoples, venerated their kings and chieftains. Thus, the common folk were not allowed to pray for their own welfare but only for their leaders, for it was believed that when the leaders prospered, so too, did the entire nation.

The main aim of the educational system was to produce good soldiers. Herodotus provides that Persian males spent their first five years in the company of their mothers but from then on were taught only three things: "to ride the horse, to pull the bow, and to speak the truth."⁵⁸ This simplification is somewhat romanticized, and Xenophon describes the regimen in greater detail.⁵⁹ Specifically, Xenophon

provides that the sons of noble Persians, including royal princes, received their training at the king's gate. From the ages of five to seventeen, the boys were taught to settle cases, shoot, and throw the spear. They also learned self-control in eating and drinking, which helped prepare them for the rigors of war. As young men, their training became more intensive. They accompanied the king on hunts, for hunting was recognized as the most useful preparation for battle, performed police duty, and passed the nights on guard around the royal residence. From the age of twenty on, they entered the ranks of mature men and served as soldiers in the king's armies.⁶⁰ Because these armies needed a steady supply of troops, each man was allowed to take several wives and concubines, and he who sired the most boys received presents from the king.

Like other ancient peoples, the Persians believed the gods to lurk behind everything. Divine expression was sought in dreams, weather conditions, and other mundane occurrences. According to one popular legend, Darius I became king because his horse was the first to neigh after sunrise – a sign of divine approval.⁶¹ As one might expect, such superstitions gave rise to ritual, and major endeavors were axiomatically prefaced with sacrifices and prayers. Permeating Persian culture was the perception that the world was the battleground between the cosmic forces of good and evil. As Strabo relates, the everyday application of this ideology was taught at an early age through the recital of epic “tales . . . endowed with a definite mythical element.”⁶² Consequently, aristocratic Persians were trained from their youth to hold the sworn word

sacred and to shun the marketplace because of the cheating and one-upmanship inherent in striking a profit. Together with the society's tribal structure, this attitude lent the culture a sense of chivalry. Ritualistic demonstrations of largess, the swearing of oaths, and the protection of one's honor through duels were commonplace.⁶³ In these respects, a distinct parallel existed with the culture of medieval Europe.

What set the Persians apart from their Iranian cousins elsewhere and prepared them to eventually administer a large and diverse empire was their exposure to Elamite civilization. The acculturation of Persians and Elamites in the highlands of Fars continued under the early Achaemenids, as evident from the fact that scribes employed by the imperial chancellery during the late sixth century BCE failed to discriminate between the bearers of Iranian and Elamite personal names among the native population of the Persian heartland. The chancellery's attitude that the members of both groups were ethnically "Persian" suggests that cultural distinctions had begun to evaporate as the Persian laity gradually intermingled with and absorbed the indigenous Elamite population in this region.⁶⁴ The Elamites were excellent administrators and imparted this talent to the Persians. The clearest example of Elamite influence in such matters occurs in the two troves of administrative texts designated as the "Persepolis Fortification Tablets" and the "Persepolis Treasury Tablets" (the names indicate the locations at Persepolis where the texts were found).[§] Drafted almost exclusively in Elamite, these texts demonstrate how Achaemenid bookkeepers accurately recorded disbursements of products and livestock from the

royal treasury to laborers, traveling delegates, and local sanctuaries. The discovery of similar administrative texts from the early sixth century BCE at Susa and other locations in southwestern Iran has led some scholars to believe that the Achaemenid rulers of Anshan also presided over relatively sophisticated bureaucracies.⁶⁵

By contrast, the administrative character of the far-flung Median Empire remains an enigma. We may be confident that a Median bureaucracy existed, for many administrative terms used within the later Persian Empire were of Median origin.[¶] However, no real trace of a Median script has survived, and although some scholars have attributed the development of Old Persian cuneiform to the Medes, inscriptions carved in the names of the Median kings have not yet been found (indeed, the origins of the Old Persian script remain obscure, as it may have been created after the fall of the Median Empire on the orders of Cyrus II or Darius I).⁶⁶

Although the Median capital Ecbatana seems to have operated as a fully functional imperial center, built on the wealth brought back from the conquest of Assyria, much of the rest of the country appears to have been dominated by roving tribes, many of Scythian or Saka descent. These conditions provide one possible explanation for the puzzling abandonment of several key Median settlements outside Ecbatana during the sixth century BCE.⁶⁷ By about 575 BCE, a sort of high society seems to have evolved at the Median capital and a few other urban centers, but outside these areas, a more or less nomadic lifestyle was the norm. This dichotomy must have hampered the development of the Median

Empire into a centralized state.

Contributing to the resurgence of Median nomadism and placing additional stress upon the political development of the Medes were the conflicting modes of property ownership practiced in the empire's agricultural areas on the one hand, and its tribal territories on the other. The evidence indicates that Median society became increasingly stratified in certain areas due to the unequal distribution of wealth following the overthrow of the Assyrian Empire. János Harmatta has concluded that Cyaxares and Astyages instituted a system whereby the crown owned all the arable land outside the imperial capital, and Dandamaev and Lukonin have found evidence that those who worked the fields were reduced to a state of base servitude.⁶⁸ This system was foreign to Iranian society and must have been modeled after Mesopotamia precedents; the purpose was to maximize the country's economic productivity and to solidify the status of the king and his nobles. However, the system could not be imposed upon the empire's sizeable nomadic population, which remained unbound to the land. The result was a divergence between the interests of the three key socio-political constituencies of the Median Empire – the monarchy, the landed gentry, and the nomadic aristocracy. This condition had the effect of destabilizing Median rule and forcing Astyages into wholesale administrative reforms (discussed in the following chapter).

The information given above represents a reconciliation of two competing lines of scholarship regarding the Median Empire. One line favors the existence of a bureaucratic imperial structure, whereas

the other contemplates a tribal confederation, dependent upon long-range seasonal raiding to control and derive wealth from outlying territories. Paradoxical opinions of the sort are possible due to the complete lack of native documentation, which has made the Median period a virtual lacuna in the historical record. This dearth of information has even prompted several scholars to argue that no Median Empire ever existed.⁶⁹ Such conclusions are, of course, inherently drastic and only necessary if we define an empire as a fully functioning centralized government instead of a tribal or hegemonic state in which many different kings owed allegiance to a single monarch, in this case the lord of Ecbatana. Furthermore the adage goes that, “the absence of evidence cannot be taken as the evidence of absence,” and the Median Empire seems too well attested in the written sources to be dismissed as a phantom. But we may well question the quality of Median rule and wonder whether the seeds of Persia’s ascent had not already been planted by the early sixth century BCE.

¶ See Appendix XVIII.

** For the identification of Oebaras with Ugbaru, see Appendix V.

† See Appendix I

‡ Specifically, the Babylonian Chronicle seems to portray Cyrus II’s later struggle against Astyages as an internal dynastic affair by corroborating Herodotus’ assertion that Astyages’ army defected and handed him over to Cyrus during an offensive campaign in the heart of Persian territory. That the name “Mandane” recurs among Cyrus’ descendants (the daughter of Atossa and Darius was also called Mandane, presumably after her great-grandmother) further corroborates Herodotus’ account that Cyrus was Astyages’ grandson.

§ The former archive consists of almost 30,000 clay tablets inscribed between the thirteenth and twenty-eighth regnal years of Darius I (509 BCE to 494 BCE), whereas the latter archive contains 753 tablets and fragments belonging to the period between the thirtieth regnal year of Darius I and the seventh regnal year of Artaxerxes I (492 BCE

to 458 BCE).

¶ See page 261.

Overthrow of the Medes: Symbols of Power

Death awaits us all, whether we win or lose. It is best then to die, since we must, while fighting to secure victory and liberate our homeland.

—Cyrus the Great’s address to the Persians on the eve of battle, according to Nicholas of Damascus

One of the main purposes of Achaemenid art was the glorification of the king. At Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of Darius I and his successors, practically every wall is adorned with images of foreign emissaries, soldiers, or courtiers supporting the king’s throne or marching in procession toward the royal figure. The king himself appears in several different scenes. Sometimes he is shown entering his palace flanked by two attendants. Other times he sits upon his throne and receives an important dignitary, who reverentially bows before him. Because this scene occurs not only at Persepolis but on the shield of one of the Persian soldiers on the so-called “Alexander Sarcophagus,” it must have had special significance.¹ What is more, in all the different permutations of this

scene, the bowing dignitary wears the tight-fitting tunic and domed cap of the Medes. The traditional explanation for this curious detail is that the dignitary represents a special officer of the court, perhaps the commander of the royal guard or the chief treasurer, who actually wore the Median costume on ceremonial occasions. This interpretation may well be valid. But it is a feature of ancient Near Eastern art that iconic images were often used to communicate multiple messages, some more subtly than others.² In this connection it is significant that no known artifact depicts an individual in Persian dress bowing before the king. The bowing courtier in Median clothes probably thus represents a carefully selected artistic motif intended to recall, among other things, the singular event that marked the birth of the Persian Empire: the submission of the Median aristocracy to the Achaemenid king.



Line drawing of the design on the inside of the shield of a Persian soldier from the so-called “Alexander Sarcophagus.” It depicts a man in a Median costume bowing before the enthroned Achaemenid king.

The sudden and surprising nature of this conquest is apparent from the sources. From the time of Ashurbanipal to Cyrus' rise to power, not a single Near Eastern text mentions the Persians or the kingdom of Anshan in a politically noteworthy context.³ On the other hand, the name of the Medes appears with relative frequency. Biblical passages from the first half of the sixth century BCE describe the Medes as a terrible force on the rise, and this picture is corroborated by the Babylonian evidence. The classical authors suggest that every Persian schoolboy was taught the story of Cyrus' war against the Medes, but exactly how Cyrus and the Persians succeeded in overthrowing so mighty a kingdom at the height of its power is nowhere spelled out. Fortunately, the sources provide enough information for us to understand the circumstances surrounding the Persians' revolt and eventual takeover of the Median state. In addition to the Greek authors, who offer separate but reconcilable accounts of the war against Astyages, we have Babylonian materials dating to the reign of King Nabonidus, a contemporary of Cyrus. Piecing together the information in these texts, we can construct a coherent narrative of the Persian rebellion against the Medes and Cyrus' first and most important conquest.

Causes of War

During the last years of Cyaxares' reign and throughout the kingship of Astyages, the old alliance between the Medes and Babylonians deteriorated, as both powers became increasingly preoccupied with asserting their influence over the Assyrian heartland,

that is, the region that not too long before had been recognized as the center of power for the known world. The Medes consolidated their grip over the northern cities of Arbela and Harran, while the Babylonians occupied Arrapha and Ashur to the south.⁴

Similar developments may have taken place farther south in Elam. It has been suggested that the ancient city of Susa vacillated between political independence and subservience to one or both of the two regional superpowers during the first half of the sixth century BCE.⁵ The so-called “Susa Acropolis Texts,” which were probably drafted between 600 BCE and 550 BCE, show the inhabitants of Susa conducting foreign relations with nearby states in an independent fashion. At the same time, the discovery at Susa of building bricks stamped with the name of Nabuchadnezzar suggests that this king established his rule over the city, seemingly no later than 584 BCE.⁶ This encroachment could not have pleased the Medes, for Elam served as a gateway to the Zagros highlands.

A sort of cold war thus developed between the kingdoms of Media and Babylonia.⁷ Accordingly, Xenophon’s story of the Babylonians using hunting expeditions as pretexts to cross into Median territory may contain more truth than is usually thought.⁸ Commanding more respect is the same author’s account of the massive fortifications raised by Nabuchadnezzar to protect against a Median attack. The so-called “Median Wall” ran between the Tigris and the Euphrates and reportedly stood about a hundred feet tall at certain points.⁹ Nabuchadnezzar was a wise and powerful king, and his efforts attest to the imminence of the Median threat. The Hebrew

prophet Jeremiah even went so far as to call the Medes and their allies to arms and to prophesy Babylon's fall:

Look, a people is coming from the north; a mighty nation and many kings are stirring from the farthest parts of the earth . . . Summon against her the kingdoms, Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz; appoint a marshal against her, bring up horses like bristling locusts. Prepare the nations for war . . . the kings of the Medes, with their governors and deputies, and every land under their rule. The land trembles and writhes, for the Lord's purposes against Babylon stand, to make the land of Babylon a desolation, without inhabitant.¹⁰

A war with Babylonia, especially the Babylonia ruled by Nabuchadrezzar, would have constituted a colossal undertaking requiring much of Media's material and human resources. To this end, Astyages would have been pressured to tighten his grip over his foreign subjects, in particular those residing in lands near the Babylonian border. On account of its proximity to Susa and historical connections with Babylonia, the kingdom of Anshan, together with other principalities in the Zagros highlands, would have been the focus of any such efforts on the part of the Median king. The marriage between Mandane and Cambyses may have represented a preliminary and benign step toward advancing Median interests in this region. However, Astyages must have considered other, more direct means of control, as well.

Herein lay an obvious problem, for the administrative apparatus that Astyages had inherited from his father afforded him little local authority in Persia. Cyaxares had spent his whole life in the field and never dedicated the necessary time and energy to organizing his far-flung conquests. As a result, the early Median Empire was administered as a

hegemonic state, with the lord of Ecbatana exercising very loose control over his more distant subjects. Herodotus writes:

When the Medes were the sovereign people, the nations even ruled each other. The Medes themselves ruled over all and also ruled the nation next to them. But those next to the Medes ruled those on their own boundaries, and these in turn those next to them, and so on.¹¹

This system of government was actually an extension of tribal politics, with personal relations between the presiding ruler and his vassal kings sufficing to ensure the unity of the empire as a whole.¹² It was beneficial in that it granted the empire's vassals a fair amount of local autonomy and, therefore, lightened the burden of their subjection. Its major weakness was its failure to provide the central authority with a means of mobilizing remote provinces in times of crisis.

One of the chief causes of the Persian uprising, we might surmise, was Astyages' attempt to restructure the old system of government to consolidate his authority in Persia. With their homeland many miles from Media, the Persians had likely grown accustomed to being left alone and therefore had little reason to mind their subjection during the early years of Median hegemony. True, Persian nobles had to present annual gifts to the Median king and supply troops when called upon, but these were slight costs, and with respect to military matters, the nobles stood to benefit as well, since war offered them the promise of plunder and booty. Besides, the Persians had always been loosely dependent upon one foreign power or another, and prior to the Medes it was the Elamites and Assyrians whose overlordship they had been forced to

acknowledge.

That Astyages eventually imposed his dominion more forcibly upon the Persians is evident from the sources. According to Herodotus, the Medes stationed guards and checkpoints all along the road to Persia and even reviewed correspondences carried by messengers.¹³ The same author further provides that, as the institution of kingship in Media became entrenched, the Median ruler relied more heavily upon spies and informants to control his subjects.¹⁴ It is even possible that Astyages entrusted the local administration of Persia to a Median satrap. In his own inscriptions, Cyrus emphasizes the absolute authority that his ancestors wielded in Anshan. However, he would hardly have broadcast the subordination of his forebears, and it is possible that one or more of these kings had to take orders from a Median potentate stationed in Persia. Even if no satrap were appointed, the narrative of Nicholas of Damascus shows that Median aristocrats enjoyed enough local power to attach Persian peasants to their estates, thereby depriving the Persian nobles of their country's manpower and resources. Herodotus' mention of the Dai (Dahae) and Dropici (Derbices) among the nomadic tribes of Persia suggests that the Medes went so far as to relocate Saka tribes, beholden to Astyages, to the Persian heartland.¹⁵ Finally, religious differences very probably contributed to the fallout between the Medes and Persians. Although we will give this matter full treatment in a subsequent chapter, it will suffice to state at present that the Persian aristocracy appears to have inclined toward the worship of Ahuramazda as their most high god, whereas Astyages and his supporters seem to have

venerated Mithra in a manner that the Persian nobles deemed sacrilegious.

The actions taken by the Medes to strengthen their hold on Persia recall the practices of the Assyrian kings, who enforced their authority by taking over the local administration of formally annexed provinces, displacing conquered tribes, carefully surveying their subjects, and subverting the cults of foreign gods to that of Ashur. Astyages' use of such tactics should not surprise us, because the Assyrians provided the Medes with an impressive and proven model of imperial governance. Like the Assyrians, the Medes probably did not implement these measures all at once but gradually over the course of several years. We might imagine that as each new policy was enforced the Persians voiced their complaints or otherwise acted in a manner that prompted stricter measures.¹⁶ Contrary to what Astyages intended, the eventual outcome was to destabilize Median control by engendering the animosity of the Persian nobility.

Disaffection of the Median Nobility

Astyages' efforts to centralize control over Persia appear to have coincided with a broader plan to redefine the role of the king in Median society. Traditionally, the Median king had ruled through a system of interpersonal alliances with the heads of the tribes under his sway. He deliberated major decisions before an assembly and made it a point to adjudicate petitions in person.¹⁷ To consolidate his power, however, Astyages elevated the status of the king and

established a sophisticated bureaucracy in the Assyrian tradition. These reforms changed the face of the Median state. The king became an increasingly remote figure, and his circle of confidants was limited to a few personally appointed officials. Furthermore, the tribal aristocrats, who had previously enjoyed virtual autonomy in their fiefdoms, were forced to surrender much of their local power to the monarch's satraps and officers. This entrenchment of royal power offended the tribal chieftains, "men as good as [the Median king] in birth and personal quality, with whom he had been brought up in earlier years."¹⁸

These conditions were probably the main cause behind the disaffection of Harpagus, the chief minister of Astyages' court and very likely the patriarch of one of the most important Median families.¹⁹ If we are to believe Herodotus, Harpagus turned against Astyages because the Median king had murdered his son and served him up as food at a banquet. But the story of a cannibalistic feast represents a common legendary motif, and it makes more sense to view Harpagus as the foremost representative of those nobles who felt disenfranchised by Astyages' monarchical reforms. Harpagus, who had a close relationship with Cyrus, convinced his allies to accept the Persian prince as their champion.

Royal Aspirations at Ecbatana and Return to Persia

How the Median nobles entered into an alliance with Cyrus is not adequately explained in the sources. According to Herodotus, Harpagus took care to win

the favor of Cyrus, who had made a name for himself in Persia as a brave warrior and charismatic leader, by sending him presents and paying him court; at the same time, Harpagus conspired with certain aristocratic Medes who had grown tired of Astyages' abuses and were receptive to the idea of dethroning the aging tyrant.²⁰ Once confident that he had rallied enough followers, Harpagus dispatched to Cyrus a letter, which, because the road to Persia was heavily guarded, was concealed in the stomach of a hare and delivered by a servant dressed as a hunter.

"Son of Cambyses," the letter ran, "since the gods watch over you – for without them you would never have been so fortunate – punish Astyages, your would-be murderer. Had he achieved his purpose, you would have died; to the gods, and to me, you owe your deliverance. Doubtless you have long known what was done to you, and how Astyages punished me for giving you to the cowherd instead of killing you. Do now as I advise, and you will become the master of the whole realm of Astyages. Persuade the Persians to revolt, and march against the Medes. It makes no odds whether I or any other Mede of distinction is appointed by the king to take command against you: you will succeed for the Median nobility will be the first to desert him and join you in the attempt to pull him down. All our preparations are made. Do what I advise and do it quickly."²¹ This letter, we are told, planted the seeds of rebellion in Cyrus' mind and caused him to coordinate his actions henceforth with Harpagus and the Medes.

Herodotus' narrative, charming though it is, fails to make sense with respect to one fundamental issue: he himself provides that the kingship of the Medes

would have naturally devolved upon Cyrus, since he was Astyages' only male descendant and the son of his daughter Mandane.²² Nowhere in his narrative does Herodotus mention another potential heir.²³ In contrast, Ctesias indicates that Astyages had in mind another successor, and this presumably formed the basis of his feud with Cyrus.²⁴ Specifically, Ctesias states that Astyages had a beautiful daughter named Amytis (Old Persian **Humati*, Avestan *Humaiti*, "Good Thought"), whose wedding dowry was to be the Median succession.²⁵ Herodotus does not mention this princess, and although he has the reputation of being more reliable, this may be one of those instances where both authors are correct. Astyages may well have had two daughters, the elder being Cyrus' mother Mandane and the younger Amytis.²⁶ Xenophon confirms the existence of both princesses but makes Amytis the granddaughter of the Median king.²⁷ Furthermore, Ctesias asserts that Amytis had already married the Mede Spitamas while Cyrus was at Ecbatana, and this shows that the fallout between Astyages and his grandson occurred while the latter was still a prominent member of the Median court.

This provides a believable context to the pact between Harpagus and Cyrus. Given that Astyages had no legitimate sons, the question of who would follow him to the throne must have loomed large during the last decade or so of his reign. Having spent much of his youth at Ecbatana where he was ostensibly groomed as Astyages' successor, Cyrus probably expected to receive Amytis' hand once he reached maturity. At the same time, certain nationalistic Medes must have worried about their empire becoming the inheritance of the Persian royal house

and pressured Astyages into selecting a Median heir. Their machinations presumably caused a serious rift within the Median court, which was already divided on account of Astyages' political reforms. Spitamas, who we may conjecture was a member of the newly formed imperial bureaucracy, received the support of this organization, while Cyrus was backed by Harpagus and the old tribal aristocrats.²⁸ Astyages' eventual choice of Spitamas over Cyrus thus represented a bitter defeat for both Cyrus and Harpagus and set in motion the key elements of the Persian rebellion.**

That Cyrus' thoughts immediately turned to seizing by force that which he had been denied is not surprising. Furthermore, he must have understood that he stood to benefit by advancing any plans to overthrow Astyages and his newly designated successor while he was at Ecbatana. There, he had access not only to Harpagus and other members of the Median aristocracy, but also to the princes and emissaries of the Medes' various subjects. Aside from Harpagus, the most important ally that Cyrus made in Media was the Persian Oebaras. Although we may dismiss out of hand the legend of how he and Cyrus met (see page 48), both the cuneiform texts and the Greek histories imply that Oebaras was a capable military leader (in his retelling of Ctesias' narrative, Nicholas of Damascus, the court historian of Herod the Great, even suggests that it was Oebaras who led Cyrus to first consider a Persian uprising as the best means of attaining the Median throne.).²⁹ Cunning and coldly efficient, Oebaras appears, in later times, to have overseen the more sinister aspects of Cyrus' empire-building, such as the elimination of potential

rivals and the ruthless enforcement of the king's will; he would eventually become Cyrus' right hand.³⁰

Having lost out on the Median succession, Cyrus must have understood that Astyages' political reforms threatened to undermine his position in Persia, as well. We might imagine that, once Astyages had decided against him, Cyrus identified more readily with his Persian heritage and took a deeper interest in the affairs of his father's kingdom. As such, he would have been awakened to the increasingly high-handed treatment that the Persians received from the Medes. Furthermore, the Persian nobles, who might have tolerated these outrages for as long as Cyrus was Astyages' presumptive heir, may have become more pronounced in voicing their resentment. Cyrus probably calculated that by leading the Persians to revolt he could at least render them the immediate service of winning their freedom even if his bid for the Median throne were to ultimately fail. For their part, the Persians had still retained their warlike ways, and the core tribes appear to have been fervently devoted to the Achaemenid house. What they lacked were the numbers, unity, and martial discipline to prevail in a prolonged struggle, but Cyrus was confident in his ability to remedy these shortcomings.

Cyrus thus spent his last days in Ecbatana intriguing against his grandfather.³¹ That the Median king was agitated by his grandson's presence is evident from the testimony of Dinon, who insinuates that Astyages was anxious to see Cyrus return to Persia.³² No doubt, the old king felt that Cyrus posed a greater threat if he were to remain in the Median capital. In contrast, Nicholas' account seems to suggest that Astyages resolved to keep Cyrus in his palace,

where he could more easily monitor his activity, and only let him leave at the news of Cambyses' imminent death.³³

Legend has it that shortly after Cyrus returned to Persia one of Astyages' minstrels sang a song about a mighty beast, bolder than a wild boar, which had been let loose in a swamp. The minstrel warned that if the beast got mastery of "the regions round it . . . it would soon contend against a multitude without difficulty." When Astyages asked "What beast?" the minstrel replied, "Cyrus the Persian."³⁴

The New King of Persia

We know little about Cambyses, other than that he was a mindful king and a devoted father.³⁵ Herodotus describes him as quiet and unassuming and suggests that he was dedicated to maintaining the peace between the Persians and the Medes.³⁶ It is therefore tempting to think that Cambyses viewed his son's ambition with a wary eye and that his death, though a grievous occasion for Cyrus, who, by all accounts honored and respected his father, ultimately facilitated the course of history by removing a moderating influence from Cyrus' circle of confidants.

In a society that permitted no man to pray for personal welfare but only for king and country, the passing of the monarch was an important event that brought the nation together. Black-clothed riders carried news of the king's death throughout the land, and all the people, both men and women, made public demonstrations of mourning. The men shaved their

heads and wore sackcloth, while the women rent their garments, and “struck their foreheads with every sign of grief.”³⁷ In the meantime, specialists covered the body of the dead king in wax to preserve it. When the body was finally ready for burial, it was hauled to the tomb on an elaborate chariot, around which the entire populace crowded. Although Cambyses’ tomb has never been found, Cyrus, as crown prince, would have presided over the funeral and instituted regular offerings at his grave.

Persian custom required an official period of mourning between the death of the king and the coronation of his heir, and based on Nicholas’ narrative, Cyrus seems to have waited five months before being crowned. The Persian priests initiated the new king during the long hours of the night by, among other things, clothing him in the royal robes and serving him with a frail of figs, some pistachios, and a cup of sour milk.³⁸ The purpose of this humble meal was to remind the king of the old Aryan way of life and to impress upon him that he was a “first among equals” whose legitimacy depended upon the welfare of his subjects. As dawn approached, the priests would have consecrated Cyrus’ royal fire, for tradition required each Persian king to maintain a burning fire for the duration of his reign. Then, as the first rays of dawn appeared over the nearby mountains, Cyrus would have presented himself to the Persian clansmen. One by one, the priests and the leading members of the Pasargadae, Maspian, and Maraphian tribes would have invested him with the various insignia of kingship and pledged their allegiance.

To ensure divine favor, hundreds of sheep, oxen,

and other cattle would have been sacrificed to the gods and heroes that looked over the land of Persia, including the spirit of Cambyses.³⁹ Since the Persian deities were only concerned with the animals' souls, the flesh was usually distributed to those present so that they might have a banquet.⁴⁰ The Persians were still a rugged people, however, and compared to Astyages' court, where the opulence of the king's majesty was displayed on a daily basis, the festivities in Persia must have seemed rather pedestrian.⁴¹ Thus, Cyrus' accession to the Persian throne could only have fueled his ultimate ambition to obtain the more distant and glorious seat of his grandfather.

Once he became king, Cyrus set about aggressively building up his power. He spent the next five years campaigning against the minor kingdoms and tribes of southwestern Iran. The details of these campaigns have not survived, but their occurrence is hinted at by Dinon and Nicholas. It was presumably at this stage that Cyrus extended his rule over the rest of the ten so-called "Persian tribes" mentioned by Herodotus.[†] These included the settled tribes of the Panthialaei, Derusiaei, and Carmanians, as well as the nomadic Mardians and Sagartians. The Dahae and Derbices, members of the powerful Saka Tigrakhauda confederation whom Astyages had settled in Persia, were also subdued.⁴²

As Cyrus' power increased, he presumably pulled more Persian nobles into his plot. To judge from his later reputation as kingmaker and politician, Oebaras must have played a pivotal role at this juncture. A major diplomatic triumph was won when the Achaemenid prince Arsames, the grandfather of Darius I, abandoned his royal pretensions and acknowledged

Cyrus' absolute overlordship. Cyrus' appreciation for Arsames' sacrifice is evident in the high honor accorded to the latter's descendants. Arsames' eldest son, Hystaspes, became one of Cyrus' trusted commanders and eventually the satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania, and Hystaspes' eldest son, Darius, served in turn as King's Spearbearer under Cambyses II.

Another powerful ally seems to have been the Achaemenid Pharnaspes, who for some reason was nicknamed "Rufus" or "the Red" (Old Persian *Thukhra*, New Persian *Sorkh*).⁴³ Like Arsames, this prince had previously enjoyed a fair measure of autonomy vis-à-vis the Anshanite throne.[‡] Cyrus deemed his alliance with Pharnaspes important enough to cement it by marrying the Achaemenid's daughter, Cassandane. According to Herodotus, Cyrus was quite devoted to this princess, who became his chief wife and bore him several children, including his eldest son and eventual heir, Cambyses II. Cyrus would appear to have married Cassandane upon taking the throne – perhaps in observance of a Persian custom requiring the king to take a new wife at the outset of his reign.⁴⁴ In that case, Pharnaspes must be counted as one of Cyrus' early supporters.

The Onset of Rebellion

With the key members of the Persian and Median aristocracies on his side and his army well drilled after several years of combat, the time was at last ripe for Cyrus to persuade the Persian people to support him in his bid for the Median throne. This was of course a

pivotal moment, as Cyrus had to be sure that his call to action would be eagerly received. If we are to believe Herodotus, he ultimately settled upon the following stratagem. First, he forged a document declaring that Astyages had granted him permission to assemble the Persian army. Then, once the men of the leading Persian tribes – the Pasargadae, Maspians, and Maraphians – had gathered, he made a strange announcement: “And now, I have an order for you: every man is to appear on parade with a billhook [a short-handled scythe].”⁴⁵ The Persians obeyed, whereupon Cyrus commanded them to clear a large stretch of land full of thorn bushes. The seemingly pointless work was difficult and took many hours to complete. When Cyrus observed that the Persians had carried out his command, he ordered them to come back the next day after having taken a bath and dressed in their finest clothes. Upon returning in accordance with Cyrus’ orders, the Persians found, much to their delight, that Cyrus had slaughtered an abundance of goats, sheep, and oxen in preparation for a great banquet. The feast lasted until nightfall, at which point Cyrus asked the Persians which of the two days they preferred: the day of feasting or the day of labor. They replied that they preferred the former, whereupon Cyrus suddenly proclaimed:

Men of Persia, listen to me: obey my orders and you will be able to enjoy a thousand pleasures as good as this without ever turning your hands to menial labor; but, if you disobey, yesterday’s task will be the pattern of innumerable others you will be forced to perform. Take my advice and win your freedom. I am the man destined to undertake your liberation, and it is my belief that you are a match for the Medes in war as in everything else. It is the truth I tell you. Do not delay, but fling off the yoke of Astyages at once.⁴⁶

According to Herodotus, the Persians, having long chafed under Median rule, welcomed the opportunity to win their freedom and rallied behind their new champion.⁴⁷

News of the rebellion quickly spread to Media, prompting Astyages to dispatch a messenger to Anshan summoning Cyrus to his court. However, Cyrus sent the messenger back with the warning that he would arrive “a good deal sooner than Astyages liked.”⁴⁸ Herodotus would have us believe that this arrogant threat provoked Astyages to retaliate swiftly; yet, we know from the cuneiform sources that the Median king was in no position to take immediate action against the rebels, for Cyrus had timed his revolt to coincide with a massive Babylonian offensive against Median possessions in northern Mesopotamia and Syria.

Babylonia had experienced a brief period of political instability following the death of Nabuchadnezzar in 562 BCE. During this time (562–556 BCE), three kings had risen to, and fallen from, power in the span of six years. Not content to watch these developments from afar, the Medes had taken advantage of their adversary’s internal problems by occupying several key border towns in northern Mesopotamia, Syria, and possibly even Elam.⁴⁹ The new king of Babylonia, the aged and eccentric Nabonidus (Akkadian *Nabu-na’id*), perhaps a son-in-law of Nabuchadnezzar, was determined to recoup these losses. In large part, Nabonidus was motivated because he was not of the same Chaldean stock as Nabuchadnezzar but, rather, an Aramaean from Harran and a devotee of the moon god Sin.⁵⁰ For centuries, the center of Sin’s cult had been Harran’s

Ehulhul Temple, which had been left in desolation ever since its destruction at the hands of the Medes in 607 BCE. At that time, Nabonidus' mother – who was still alive when her son became king – may have been the temple's high priestess, and so Nabonidus had made it his lifelong goal to liberate Ehulhul from the Medes and rebuild it. Apparently aware of Nabonidus' particular interest in Harran, Astyages stationed his main army there, but this did not stop the Babylonian king from realizing his dream. Nabonidus' forces approached Harran only to find that the Medes had suddenly abandoned the city, no doubt to cope with the more serious threat posed by the Persian uprising (553 BCE).

The inscription on the Sippar Cylinder that records Nabonidus' conquest of Harran interestingly predicts Cyrus' ultimate victory over the Medes. Specifically, the inscription provides that, during his accession year (556–555 BCE), the gods appeared to Nabonidus in a dream and ordered him to restore the Temple of Sin. However, Nabonidus expressed reservation at confronting the Median forces quartered in Harran: “But that temple which you told me to build, the Umman Manda [Astyages] surrounds it, and his might is excessive.”⁵¹ The god Marduk was quick to respond:

“The Umman Manda of whom you are speaking, his land, and the kings who march at his side are no more!” When the third year comes [553 BCE], [Marduk] will cause Cyrus, King of Anshan, his little slave, to advance against him with his small army. He will overthrow the wide extending Umman Manda; he will capture Astyages, King of the Umman Manda, and take him in bonds to his own land.⁵²

Many scholars have taken this inscription as

evidence that Cyrus and Nabonidus must have concluded a formal alliance (perhaps as early as 556 BCE) and deliberately harmonized their efforts against the Medes.⁵³ But as tantalizing as this proposition is, it cannot be proved.⁵⁴

Whether or not he was acting in unison with Nabonidus, Cyrus certainly benefited from Astyages being tied up on two fronts. By the time the Median army was ready to move against Persia, it must have been rather late in the campaign season. According to Herodotus, Harpagus lobbied for command of the expedition, and Astyages gave it to him.⁵⁵ Consequently, when the Median and Persian armies met, Harpagus defected with most of his men. Of the Median troops who were not involved in the plot, the vast majority deliberately shirked their duty and took flight, while only a few stood their ground and were killed. It was a shameful turn of events, and one that resonated loudly throughout the Median Empire.

From Cyrus' camp, the call went out to all his allies among the Medes and the tribes subject to their rule. Harpagus' betrayal served as the general signal for many of these peoples to revolt and declare their support for the Persian prince.⁵⁶ The Hyrcanians, who inhabited the easternmost foothills and valleys of the Alborz Mountains, were the first to rise up in support of Cyrus and were for this reason perennially honored by the Achaemenid kings.⁵⁷ The Parthians and Sakas of northeastern Iran together with the Armenians and Kadusians are also remembered as having sympathized with the Persian prince.⁵⁸ That these peoples should have made common cause with the Persians is explainable on the basis that Astyages may have threatened to tighten Median control over their

lands as well. Moreover, Cyrus must have been well known to their leaders from his days at Ecbatana and regarded by many as more deserving of the kingship.⁵⁹

Because the rebellions in these borderlands struck closer to home than the Persian one, Astyages was unable to mount a major expedition against Cyrus for two full years (552–551 BCE). In the meantime, Cyrus must have been busy eliminating any hostile Median forces stationed in and around Persia and striving to make inroads toward Ecbatana. We may surmise that the fighting was difficult and that Cyrus was unable to penetrate deep into Median territory. In part, this had to do with the terrain, as the passes leading into and out of Persia were few and tended to fill up in the winter, thereby limiting the campaign season to about six months.⁶⁰ The Persians also seem to have met with several reverses, for the Greek authors speak of Persian deserters in Astyages' camp and otherwise present Cyrus' situation in 550 BCE as desperate.⁶¹ Still, Cyrus was relentless, and matters were such that Astyages felt the need to move against his grandson in person.



Nineteenth-century illustration of Cyrus entering an enemy stronghold.

The Defeat of Astyages

Led by Astyages himself, the Median invasion of the Persian heartland in 550 BCE was intended to end the rebellion in one swift stroke. According to Herodotus, Astyages' army included every able-bodied man that the Median king could conscript, and both the Babylonians and Nicholas indicate that Cyrus' forces were heavily outnumbered.⁶² The core of the Median host consisted of a well-trained professional army, organized into separate divisions of spearmen, archers, and cavalry, whose arms and armor were paid for by the royal treasury and were therefore state of the art. Supplementing this core were auxiliary

divisions of mercenaries and conscripts drawn from the Median peasantry and the empire's various subjects, the most feared of which were the Scythian and Saka hordes that had settled in northwestern Iran. Highly maneuverable atop their small horses, the nomadic mounted archers were capable of swarming and dispersing columns of infantry in the open field. Moreover, their famously avaricious chieftains owed direct allegiance to the Median king, and it is not a stretch to picture Astyages seeking to satiate their thirst for plunder by promising them the best pastures in Persia and a sizable portion of the treasures that he expected to seize.

Details of Astyages' invasion can be found in the sources. Nicholas reports that the Persians retreated into the mountains at the approach of the Median army, which presumably entered Persia in the vicinity of modern Izad Khvast on the main road connecting Esfahan to Shiraz.⁶³ Here, the flat deserts of central Iran give way to the sheer elevation of the southern Zagros. What thoughts passed through Cyrus' mind as the Median host advanced across the plain we are not told, but it must have been an awesome sight akin to what Xenophon noted in his *Anabasis* regarding the approach of Artaxerxes II's army at Cunaxa (401 BCE):

[First] dust appeared, like a white cloud, and after some time a sort of blackness extending a long way over the plain. When they got nearer, then suddenly there were flashes of bronze, and the spear points and the enemy formations became visible. There were cavalry with white armor . . . soldiers with wicker shields, and then came [heavy-armed infantry] with wooden shields reaching to the feet . . . Then there were more cavalry and archers. These all marched in . . . dense oblong [formations].⁶⁴

The Persians withdrew into the defiles of their

mountains, where they braced themselves for a devastating fight. Oebaras had “seized the passes of the mountains and the heights, built lines, and brought the people from the open cities into such as were well fortified.”⁶⁵ It was a wise move, for Astyages ravaged every settlement in his path. The Median king sought to lure Cyrus to battle by taunting him with cruel insults, but Cyrus replied that the gods despised Astyages and would inevitably grant the Persians victory. Words went only so far, however, and in due course the two sides engaged in battle before a fortified town deep within the Persian mountains.

According to Nicholas’ dramatized account, Astyages watched the fight from his throne, protected by a detachment of 20,000 spearmen. The outnumbered Persians fought courageously. But the Medes attacked in relays, and the Persians eventually succumbed to their superior numbers and fled behind the walls of the town. That night, the Persians sent their women and children away to Pasargadae, where additional reinforcements lay in wait. The battle resumed on the following day. Cyrus divided his army into two columns, positioning the larger, which he himself commanded, outside the walls and the smaller one within the town. The Persians again fought more valorously than the Medes, but Astyages made use of his superior numbers by detaching a large contingent of troops to outflank the Persians and attack the town from behind. The maneuver was executed so perfectly that the Medes breached the walls before the defenders could even react, and the Persians in the field, realizing that they were “caught between two fires,” fled deeper into the mountains.⁶⁶

There, Cyrus regrouped his men and prepared to

fight again, this time in a narrow pass leading to the valley of Pasargadae. The precise spot where Cyrus drew up his defenses is described by Nicholas as the base of a ravine surrounded by high cliffs and backed by a towering mountain. Cyrus was reluctant to commit his entire army to battle and once again divided his forces, leaving a body of 10,000 heavy infantry under Oebaras' command to defend the pass while stationing the bulk of the Persian army some distance away. Meanwhile, the Medes, who had lingered at the site of the first battle to bury the dead, cautiously made their way through the base of the ravine.⁶⁷ Recognizing that he could not dislodge the Persians by means of a simple frontal assault, Astyages sought to control the surrounding heights. This was easier said than done, but the maneuver forced Cyrus and Oebaras to evacuate their forces under the cover of night. To execute the retreat without being pursued, Cyrus resorted to stratagem. Aware that some Persians planned to desert to the enemy, he falsely informed his men that he expected several thousand reinforcements to arrive at any moment from the nations that had rebelled against the Medes. That night, the Persian deserters told Astyages about the reinforcements, and Cyrus ordered each man in his army – and not just the torchbearers – to stand on guard with a flame in his hand. “The Medes, seeing the great number of fires burning, assumed that the reinforcements had arrived; and instead of pursuing the defeated foe, thought it better to retreat.”⁶⁸ This clever ploy bought the Persians some much needed time, but it did not dissuade the Medes from pressing the attack on the following morning.

Today, Pasargadae is a serene valley ringed on all

sides by mountains and home to the scanty remains of Cyrus' palace complex. Although the nomads who still pass through the valley are oblivious to the fact, the area was the site of one of the most important battles in Iranian history. According to Nicholas, the battle was hard fought and lasted two days.⁶⁹ The fiercest action took place around a low mountain, atop which the Persians had gathered their women and children. Questions persist as to the exact location of Nicholas' mountain, but because the local population of Fars has traditionally used the Bolaghi Gorge at the south of the valley as a safe haven in times of trouble, one might think to look for the mountain there.⁷⁰

The first day of combat saw the Persians do everything in their power to prevent Astyages' troops from assailing their position. The latter found the approach difficult due to the ruggedness of the terrain. Dense thickets of oak and olive trees obstructed their movement, as did the guerrilla tactics of the Persians, who hurled javelins and large stones at them from the surrounding heights. The Medes did not relent, however, and so Cyrus turned to the gods. He traveled by moonlight through the mountains to an abandoned shepherd's hut. There, on the base of cypress and laurel trunks situated in a small courtyard, he made an offering of barley flour and started a ritualistic fire.⁷¹ According to legend, a flash of lightning and the sound of thunder soon ensued, and birds of prey, sacred to the war god Verethragna, bestower of the Royal Glory, surrounded the hut. Satisfied with these omens, Cyrus returned to his army. He organized a great meal and with well-chosen words put to rest the fears of his men.

The next morning, the Persians, whose spirits

Cyrus had lifted with his account of the birds, descended from the mountain just as the Medes, who had surrounded its base, ascended toward its summit. The two sides “fought long, vigorously, and courageously.”⁷² At first, the advantage lay with the Persians, but Astyages placed special troops “behind those who were already in combat and ordered them to drive back into the enemy at sword point any who hesitated [to fight]. He told his soldiers that, if they did not win, they would find at their rear troops just as formidable as those in front.”⁷³ No choice but to carry on, the Medes experienced a great surge of morale and nearly succeeded in taking the hill, but the tide of battle turned once again. Mustering whatever strength they had left, the Persians hurled back the enemy in a single onslaught. The Persians cut through the Median battle lines, and Astyages’ army collapsed in a disorganized mob.⁷⁴

Several Greek authors interestingly ascribe a prominent role in the victory to the Persian women. Nicholas and Justin relate that when on the second day of fighting the Persians had lost all heart and started retreating up the mountain their women ran out to meet them and begged them to resume the fight.⁷⁵ The men hesitated, whereupon the women shamed them to action by lifting up their skirts and derisively asking the men whether they intended to run all the way back into their mothers’ wombs. Although this tale smacks of folklore, we have it on Plutarch’s better authority that later Persian kings honored the women of Pasargadae for their part in the battle by presenting each with a gold coin whenever the royal entourage entered the city.⁷⁶ Moreover, the ancient Iranians had a tradition of female warriors,

and the Mardian women are known to have fought alongside their men.⁷⁷ If the Persian women were indeed trapped atop the mountain as Nicholas maintains, it is entirely believable that they would have assisted the men in some capacity, especially during those desperate moments when the Medes seemed poised to take the summit.

Embellished though the details of the actual combat may be, the classical sources unanimously agree as to the significance of the Persian victory. The third century CE Macedonian rhetorician Polyaeus states that it was so complete “that the Medes never again ventured to face Cyrus in battle,” and Strabo asserts that “Cyrus held Pasargadae in honor, because he there conquered Astyages the Mede in his last battle, transferred to himself the empire of Asia, founded a city, and constructed a palace as a memorial of his victory.”⁷⁸ As to how Astyages fell into Cyrus’ hands, the Babylonian Chronicle offers the following:

[Astyages] mustered [his army] and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan, for [the] conquest [*lacuna*] The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner. They handed him over to Cyrus [*lacuna*] Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods, property [*lacuna*] which he carried off as booty [from] Ecbatana he took to Anshan. The goods [and] property of the army of [*lacuna*].⁷⁹

Perhaps, the mutiny alluded to in the Babylonian Chronicle occurred in response to Astyages executing his generals for their incompetence at Pasargadae, as reported by Diodorus.⁸⁰ Photius’ summary of Ctesias’ narrative presents a different account of Astyages’ capture. According to Photius, who here relates a piece of genuine Iranian folklore, Astyages escaped to

Ecbatana and hid in the attic of the royal palace only to surrender when Cyrus threatened to send his grandchildren to torture.⁸¹ The more plausible account of Nicholas has Astyages fall prisoner following another battle, which was perhaps nothing more than a mop-up operation.⁸² In any event, the text of the Sippar Cylinder implies that Astyages was apprehended in Median territory, while the Babylonian Chronicle makes clear that this took place before Cyrus seized Ecbatana.⁸³

With the Median army crippled and Astyages made prisoner, the war was effectively over. To be sure, some Median nobles still held out in their mountain fortresses, and certain members of Astyages' family reportedly continued the fight from Median-controlled lands in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Iran. But none of these recalcitrants was capable of staging a serious defense or counterattack, and Cyrus could deal with them later, after he had secured possession of Ecbatana.

Seeing the finality of things, Harpagus, it is said, seized the opportunity to gloat at his former master. "How is your slavery now," he declared when the shackled Astyages was brought into the Persian camp, "compared to your kingliness then?" Astyages looked upon him and asked whether Cyrus' work was his doing, to which Harpagus responded that it was. Astyages then replied, "Then by your confession you have proved yourself at once the stupidest and most unjust man alive: stupidest, because you might have become king yourself, if the present circumstances are really of your making, and instead have turned over the power to someone else; most unjust if, because of that feast [your grudge against me], you have made

slaves of the Medes. If you had to confer the royal power on someone else rather than keep it yourself, it would have been more just to grant that good to some Mede and not to a Persian.”⁸⁴ It was a bitter rebuke, but one that fell on deaf ears, for at that very moment many of Astyages’ former subjects, including a great number of Medes, were clamoring to pay homage to the new lord of Iran.

The Capture of Ecbatana and the Birth of the Achaemenid Empire

Cyrus installed himself on Astyages’ throne with all due pomp and ceremony. Nicholas relates that, in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Pasargadae, the Persians captured Astyages’ royal tent and turned the Median crown jewels over to Cyrus. Donning for the first time the purple robe and golden scepter of the Median king, Cyrus sat upon his grandfather’s throne amid the cheers of his men, who hailed him as the “King of the Medes and the Persians.”⁸⁵ Oebaras received as a reward for his part in the rebellion the special privilege of crowning Cyrus with the tall, purple royal headdress. Soon after, emissaries from the rulers of the Parthians, Hyrcanians, and Sakas officially transferred to Cyrus the allegiance that these nations had pledged to the Medes. With the support of Astyages’ former vassals and numerous Median nobles, Cyrus could now enter Ecbatana in the manner of a native king.

We can only imagine the pride that Cyrus felt as he rode toward the Median capital. Built on the

massive wealth seized from the Assyrians some six decades earlier, Ecbatana was beautiful. The Greek historian Polybius (lived 203–120 BCE) provides that it was “vastly superior to all the other cities in wealth and the splendor of its buildings.”⁸⁶ Within the palaces, the woodwork was all of cedar and cypress, and the ceilings, floors, and columns were covered with polished silver and gold tiles that shimmered in the sun.⁸⁷ Sadly, virtually nothing remains of this wondrous complex, which captured the imagination of Greek and Hebrew authors alike.⁸⁸ But to understand what Ecbatana meant to the Persians, we must remember that the western Iranians viewed the Medes as the heirs to Assyria’s much respected imperial legacy. Thus, for Cyrus and his men, the seizure of the Median capital signified Persia’s ascent as a ruling nation.

Ecbatana’s inhabitants must have been apprehensive at the approach of the Persian army. In all likelihood, the city’s population expected Cyrus to act in the manner of the old Assyrian kings, who gloried in the cruel treatment of vanquished foes. But the new lord of the Medes was as graceful in victory as he was energetic in war. There was no pillaging, mass murder, or exile. Cyrus had started the war with the goal of winning the Median throne and was now determined to conduct himself in the manner of a Median king.

It was perhaps only within the confines of Astyages’ palace that Cyrus declared his dominion to the Median nobles. To emphasize his victory over Astyages, Cyrus would have presented the vanquished king to his former subjects in chains.⁸⁹ To be sure, Herodotus and Ctesias both assert that Cyrus treated

Astyages with respect, but first he had to make a firm showing of his newfound power. The Babylonian texts suggest that a shackled Astyages was paraded in Anshan after the fall of Ecbatana, and it makes sense that Cyrus would have similarly displayed his grandfather to the Medes. In his address to the Median nobles, Cyrus no doubt proclaimed that the gods had deprived Astyages of his kingship for failing to rule with justice. In contrast, the new king of Media would take care to ensure the welfare of the Medes, as long as they pledged their allegiance to him. The exact words that Cyrus used are unknown to us, but their substance appears to have been preserved by Xenophon:

“My men,” said Cyrus, “you have now saved your lives by your submission; and in the future also, if you continue to be obedient, no change whatever shall come to you except that you shall not have the same ruler over you as before; but you shall dwell in the same houses and work the same farms; you shall live with the same wives and have control of your children just as now . . . Thus he spoke and they did obeisance and promised to do what he directed.⁹⁰

The Median nobles were thus permitted to retain their estates, and many key political offices were entrusted to high-ranking Medes, albeit, we might assume, only to those who were closely connected to Harpagus. This policy stemmed in part from necessity, for the Achaemenid king needed the assistance of the Medes in governing the territories that they once controlled.

There remained the practical business of conquest. One of Cyrus’ main concerns must have been the disposal of Ecbatana’s treasury. This enormous hoard provided him with limitless resources

for the prosecution of future wars, and its conveyance back to Persia, which cemented the transfer of power, was entrusted to Oebaras.⁹¹ The treatment of captives was also an issue that had to be settled expeditiously. Cyrus had probably taken a fair amount of prisoners in the aftermath of his final victory over Astyages and all through the march to Ecbatana, and he now had to decide whom to free, whom to keep in custody or servitude, and whom to distribute as slaves to his followers. Most readings of the Babylonian Chronicle do not list captives or slaves among the spoils that the Persians transported from Media to Anshan. At the same time, there can be no doubt that certain political prisoners were dealt with ruthlessly. Ctesias states that Cyrus had Spitamas executed for uttering a lie. What Ctesias is likely referring to is Spitamas' obstinate refusal to swear allegiance to the Persian king, for in Persian royal ideology insubordination to the monarch was considered "lying."⁹² That Cyrus would have eliminated Spitamas despite sparing Astyages' life seems reasonable. Whereas the old Astyages was Cyrus' grandfather, Spitamas was relatively young and energetic, such that he would have posed a serious threat for as long as he lived. The manner of death traditionally reserved for a pretender to the throne, as Cyrus is sure to have viewed Spitamas, was to have his head and right hand chopped off, although more painful and prolonged methods of execution such as impalement, flaying, or crucifixion were also meted out.

With Spitamas liquidated, Cyrus solidified his standing in the eyes of the Medes and their former subjects by taking Amytis as his wife. In the ancient world, interpersonal and tribal relationships were

paramount, and as a result, dynastic affiliations were taken rather seriously, especially by the Iranians and, among them, the Medes and Sakas in particular.⁹³ Cyrus further enhanced his popularity among the Medes some time later by freeing Astyages, who, according to Ctesias, publicly endorsed Cyrus as his son and heir. Herodotus relates that Astyages enjoyed a princely life at Cyrus' court for the rest of his years, whereas Ctesias and Justin state that Astyages became Cyrus' viceroy in the land of the Barkanians (probably the Hyrcanians).⁹⁴ According to Justin, Cyrus even offered to make Astyages his governor over the Medes, but the deposed monarch would not have it.⁹⁵ That Cyrus treated Astyages with exemplary kindness only added to the Persian conqueror's fame, both in Iran and abroad.

Cyrus' ability to rule with the apparent assent of Astyages and the actual support of a large segment of the Median aristocracy must have smoothed the transition of power. Although Media was reduced to the level of a tax-paying satrapy, governed by Oebaras, its people were honored on an equal footing with the Persians and distinguished from those belonging to "other lands" and "speaking different tongues."⁹⁶ Medes played a significant role in the new imperial bureaucracy, and the Persians relied heavily upon Median military expertise and manpower in their future conquests. Ecbatana, the marvelous sanctuary of Iranian kingship, remained an important seat of power and a regular residence of the Achaemenid rulers, who gradually adopted the royal protocol of the Median kings. Thus, to the Greeks, Hebrews, and other ancient peoples, the Achaemenid Empire was essentially a continuation of the Median

state and belonged to both “the Medes and the Persians.” This reconfigured union between the Medes and Persians resulted in the infusion of a youthful vigor into the empire that the Medes had forged and marked the true beginnings of Iran’s nationhood.



Persepolis relief showing Persian and Median nobles filing into the royal palace. The Persians wear fluted crowns and flowing Elamite robes. The Medes don domed caps, trousers, and long overcoats. The nobles hold hands to symbolize the unity of the two most important nations in the empire.

** We should be careful in reconstructing the causes of this important conflict from Greek authorities who obtained their information from legends and hearsay. Nevertheless, the fact remains that something must have made Cyrus’ relationship with Astyages sour, and feuds between kings and princes usually involve the succession.

† Whether the Patischorians and Cyrtians were also subjugated at this stage is uncertain. These tribes lived to the northwest of modern Fars and were overlooked by Herodotus in his list of Persian tribes. As such, they may have acknowledged Cyrus’ reign only after the conclusion of the war with the Medes. Indeed, some scholars have cited the Babylonian Chronicle, which refers to Cyrus as the “King of

Anshan” in the entry for 550–549 BCE but as the “King of Parsu” for 547–546 BCE, as evidence that Cyrus did not fully unify the Persian tribes until after the conquest of Ecbatana.

‡ See page 367.

Subjugation of Lydia and Ionia

*O omnipotent god,
Where is the lord, the son of Leto?
Gone is Alyattes' palace . . .
The Persians have devastated the city . . .
What was detested is now welcome: Death is
sweet. §*

—Attributed to Croesus by the Greek poet Bacchylides
of Keos

In the sixth century BCE, the most culturally advanced part of the Greek world lay not in mainland Greece, which was then mired in a dark age, but on the other side of the Aegean Sea, along the western coast of Asia Minor. There, the Greeks constructed magnificent temples to the gods, built up powerful navies for war, exploration, and commerce, and established fruitful contacts with significant civilizations, such as Egypt, Phoenicia, and Lydia. Asia Minor was also where the early pre-Socratic philosophers flourished. These thinkers studied a wide array of subjects, ranging from mathematics and astronomy to man's perception of the divine. Perhaps

the greatest of them, Xenophanes of Colophon became famous for preaching the existence of a single abstract god and postulating, based on his study of fossils, that the earth had once been entirely submerged under water. Xenophanes was also a skilled poet, and although most of his poetry is now lost, some interesting lines have been preserved by Aristotle's prized student, Theophrastus:

*In winter, as you lie on a soft couch by the fire,
Full of good food, munching on nuts and drinking sweet wine,
Then you must ask questions such as these:
"Where do you come from? Tell me, what is your age?
How old were you when the Mede came?"*¹

The "Mede" referenced in these verses is Cyrus, and the allusion is to the Persian conquest of Lydia and Ionia, to which Xenophanes had been an eyewitness in his youth.

As Xenophanes accurately perceived, the arrival of the Persians in Asia Minor was a momentous occasion. Any notion that the balance of power between the great kingdoms of the day would remain undisturbed as a result of Cyrus' rise to power quickly dissipated when the Persian king appeared before the gates of Sardis, the Lydian capital, in the early winter of 545–544 BCE.² Cyrus' ability to so effortlessly overrun a powerful kingdom signaled the emergence of a new and aggressive force on the world stage. Once Sardis fell, nations such as Babylonia and Egypt had no choice but to brace for a Persian attack. Cyrus' conquest of Asia Minor was also significant in that it marked the earliest political interactions between the Iranians and Greeks. Xenophanes had this historic event in mind when he wrote his poem, and it is well

known that the wars between Cyrus' successors and the mainland Greeks caused the latter to view themselves as a true nation with different cultural and political values than the civilizations of the East. This important development underlay the foundations of Western civilization.

Military Forays into the West

For Cyrus, the road to the west and the “wine-blue sea,” as the Greeks called the Aegean, started in the arid plains of Iran. That his rule was widely recognized in the lands formerly controlled by the Medes is evident from the traditions that have various Median subjects volunteer their allegiance to him after the Battle of Pasargadae. Nevertheless, several pockets of resistance seem to have persisted even after Cyrus took his seat upon Astyages' throne. According to Justin, certain tribes that had formerly paid tribute to the Medes refused to acknowledge Cyrus' kingship.³

The fragmentary history of Ctesias suggests that the bulk of the opposition was concentrated in the east and led by kinsmen of Astyages. These rebels apparently solicited the aid of the Bactrians and their Saka allies, who engaged the Persians in a hard-fought yet indecisive battle but afterward yielded upon learning that Astyages had blessed the union between his daughter Amytis and Cyrus.⁴ According to Xenophon, the heaviest fighting occurred in the west. Drawing on information gleaned during his march through Mesopotamia in 401 BCE, Xenophon provides that Cyrus besieged several fortresses in Assyria where

Astyages' kinsmen had taken refuge.⁵ Although Xenophon's account of the battles that Cyrus fought are clearly legendary, the overall gist of his narrative is believable, as the Bisutun Inscription mentions dissidence caused in the Assyrian heartland by relatives of the Median kings in 522–521 BCE.⁶ The Bisutun Inscription further attests to the staunch loyalty that certain Armenian tribes had to the Median royal house, so it makes sense to think that Cyrus also campaigned in Armenia during the two or three years following his conquest of Ecbatana in 550 BCE.

The need to move rapidly from one frontier to another must have made time-consuming diplomacy infeasible for Cyrus in his campaigns against the dissident remnant, so the Persian conqueror would have been more likely to punish his enemies ruthlessly, in hopes that the fear of his wrath would deter future resistance. It was probably Cyrus' public execution or crushing defeat (the verb used in the inscription is ambiguous) of a former Median vassal in Armenia or Assyria that gave rise to the following entry in the Babylonian Chronicle:

[Nabonidus'] ninth year [547–546 BCE]: . . . In the month of Nisannu [March–April], Cyrus, King of Parsu, mustered his troops and crossed the Tigris below Arbela. In the month of Ajaru [April–May], he [marched] against the land of [*lacuna*], killed [or defeated] its king, took away his possessions, and stationed his own garrison there [*lacuna*]. Thereafter, the king [Cyrus] and his garrison remained there.⁷

Hostile Relations with Persia's Western Neighbors

While Cyrus was consolidating his power,

important developments were afoot in the west. In 552 BCE, the Babylonian king Nabonidus, having entrusted the administration of the imperial capital to his eldest son Belshazzar, invaded the Arabian Peninsula. His principal objective was the seizure of the wealthy oasis-city of Tema, which, like Harran, housed an important sanctuary to the moon god Sin. Nabonidus captured the city and killed its king. Rather than return to Mesopotamia, however, he remained in Tema for the next ten years, busying himself with the conquest of other Arabian oases and the construction of magnificent temples to his favorite deity. An inscription of Nabonidus from Harran mentions messengers from Ecbatana traveling to Tema, ostensibly to congratulate the Babylonian king on his further Arabian conquests, which extended as far south as Medina: “At the word of Sin . . . Ishtar, lady of battle . . . crossed her hands . . . and the kings of the land of Egypt, the city of the Medes, the land of the Arabs, and all the kings who were hostile, for peace and good relations sent messengers before me.”⁸ Although the year in which this event took place is not specified, the unusual and vague reference to the “city of the Medes” indicates that Cyrus sent the embassy just after capturing Ecbatana, before he had gained control of the rest of the Median Empire.⁹ Soon after, however, the Babylonians must have regarded Cyrus’ activities with wary eyes, for this inscription is the last cuneiform record to attest to such friendly relations. The Persian campaign across the Tigris in 547 BCE (an event important enough to merit mention in the Babylonian Chronicle) presumably had something to do with the deteriorating relations.¹⁰

Even more apprehensive was the Lydian king

Croesus, the son of Alyattes. As part of Lydia's treaty with the Medes (585 BCE), Astyages had married one of Alyattes' daughters. It was on account of this dynastic union, says Herodotus, that Croesus was greatly stung by the news of the Median king's defeat. Croesus had heard reports that "the power of Persia was steadily increasing" and so "wondered if he might be able to check Persian expansion before it had gone too far."¹¹ The Lydian monarch also had a "craving to extend his territories" and desired to avenge Astyages' defeat by "bringing down the power of Cyrus and the Persians."¹² He was probably emboldened by the opportunity to press Lydia's historical claim to the lands east of the Halys River, where his father had spent six years trying to drive the Medes out of Cappadocia (590–585 BCE).

Herodotus has much to say about Croesus. The kings of Croesus' Mermnad dynasty had long aspired to the conquest of the Greek cities of Asia, and early in his reign, Croesus had forced all the Asiatic Greeks – Ionians, Aeolians, and Dorians – to pay him tribute (559 BCE). The Lydian king was deeply interested in commercial matters and public works. He advanced the circulation of coins – made of gold, silver, or electrum and impressed with the image of a lion attacking a bull – and his economic policies benefited the Greeks. One of Croesus' greatest contributions to the arts was his funding of the beautifully adorned and colossal temple of Artemis in the Ionian city of Ephesus, later writers ranked the structure among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Work on the temple began around 550 BCE and was not completed until a few decades later. Appreciative of Croesus' patronage, one after another,

the Greek teachers of the day visited Sardis, and the Lydian king became famous throughout the Hellenic world for discoursing with such prominent figures as Thales of Miletus, Solon the Athenian law-giver, and Aesop the fable-teller.¹³

Croesus was also a stalwart believer in oracles and, according to Herodotus' famous story, sought divine approval for his contemplated invasion of Persia. To this end, he dispatched envoys to the oracles of Apollo at Delphi and the seer Amphiaraus in Boeotia with expensive presents. The Lydians entrusted with the conveyance of these gifts asked the oracles whether it would be wise to seek an alliance and whether Croesus should march against the Persians. In each instance, the answer was said to be the same. For an ally, Croesus should look to the most powerful of the Greeks, and if Croesus crossed the Halys and attacked the Persians, "he would destroy a great empire."¹⁴ Without pausing to consider which empire the oracles had in mind, Croesus rejoiced and sent to Delphi again to ask if his kingdom would be of long duration. The oracle allegedly replied that his reign would last until a mule sat upon the Median throne.¹⁵ This response further heartened Croesus, who interpreted it to mean that his kingdom would endure forever, as there was no chance that an animal would ever become king of the Medes.

Trusting that the gods were firmly on his side, Croesus began searching for an ally among the mainland Greeks, as the oracles had advised him to do. His councilors properly guided him to consider for this purpose the pre-eminent city-states of Athens and Sparta (or Lacedaemon, as Sparta was formally called). If we are to believe Herodotus, the Lydian

king was disinclined to ally himself with the Athenians, because their city was chafing under tyrannical rule, whereas the Spartans, who had previously endured a period of great depression, were a nation on the rise. The truth was that Athens was primarily a naval power, whereas Sparta had a well-deserved reputation for producing the best land soldiers in all of Greece. Indeed, Sparta's dictatorial government was so single-mindedly dedicated to the development of a powerful army that all male citizens were trained for military service by being forced to endure a brutal rite of passage, during which they were cast out of society and encouraged to survive through robbery and criminal behavior, with the caveat that they would be tortured to death in public if they were caught. It was undoubtedly on account of their warlike ways that Croesus approached the Spartans, who, having some time earlier received a present of gold from the Lydian king, proved more than willing to enter into an alliance against a nation, the Persians, whose name they had probably never heard.¹⁶

Equally successful were Croesus' attempts to forge military alliances with the great empires of the east. Despite failing to provide the relevant details, Herodotus reports that, even before soliciting the aid of the Spartans, Croesus had prevailed upon Amasis, pharaoh of Egypt, and Labynetos (the Greek rendering of Nabonidus), king of the Babylonians, to make common cause against the Persians.¹⁷ The existence of these alliances is also mentioned by Xenophon.¹⁸ Like the Spartans, Amasis probably threw in with Croesus on the strength of his past dealings with the Lydians and not because he perceived the distant Persians as a

genuine threat.

The assembly of nations arrayed against Cyrus thus recalled in strength the coalition that had laid waste to the Assyrian Empire some sixty years earlier. However, the Achaemenid conqueror was no indulgent despot but a strict military commander, and the forces at his disposal were far mightier than any army fielded by the last Assyrian king. Certain Lydian nobles had the prudence to question whether an attack on the Persians was really worthwhile. According to Herodotus, the magnate Sandanis earned the respect of his peers when he attempted to dissuade Croesus from military action by emphasizing the Persians' ruggedness:

My lord . . . you are preparing to fight against men who dress in leather – both breeches and everything else. So rough is their country that they eat as much as they have, never as much as they want. They drink no wine but only water. They have no good things at all, not even figs for dessert. Now if you conquer this people, what will you get from them, seeing they have nothing for you to take? And if they conquer you, think how many good things you will lose; for once they taste the luxuries of Lydia they will hold on to them so tightly that nothing will make them let go. I myself am thankful that the gods have never put it into the Persians' heads to attack the Lydians.¹⁹

Croesus, however, did not pay attention to these words and proceeded with his preparations. He was no doubt confident in his own martial ability and probably ill-informed as to the size of Cyrus' empire and its military resources.

What Cyrus was up to while Croesus sketched out his plan of attack we do not know. Diodorus tells us that the Persian king first caught wind of Croesus' hostile intentions when the Ephesian Eurybatus,

whom Croesus had sent to recruit mercenaries from the Peloponnesus, defected to Cyrus with the money he had received for his mission. Thus, says Diodorus, did the name “Eurybatus” become a byword for knavery among the Greeks. Although we have no reason to deny Eurybatus’ treachery, it seems odd that an Ionian from Ephesus would have gone over to the distant Persians unless he was already on the take. We may accordingly wish to recall that Cyrus was adept at the use of spies and assume that the Persian king had previously gathered intelligence about Croesus’ plans from other agents.²⁰

Cyrus’ first reaction was to stall the Lydian invasion by inviting the Ionian cities to revolt. Cyrus’ overtures to the Ionians appear to have been especially passionate. At about this time, concepts intrinsic to the Iranian (and specifically Zoroastrian) world view began to pervade the teachings of the Ionian philosophers. These ideas would penetrate Greek thought more thoroughly following the Persian conquest, but the thinking is that Cyrus’ emissaries to Ionia included Zoroastrian priests, who portrayed the Achaemenid king as the ideal ruler, empowered by the god of creation to return the world to the perfect state of calm and tranquility that had existed at the beginning of time. Despite the receptivity of certain Ionian thinkers, Cyrus’ emissaries failed to persuade the political elites. Much to their detriment, the Ionians did not take Cyrus’ proposal to revolt seriously.²¹

Defeat of Croesus and the Fall of Sardis

Croesus began mustering his troops along the banks of the Pactolus River near Sardis. The backbone of his army was the Lydian cavalry, said to be the best in the world, heavily armored and equipped with long spears. Next in importance were the “hoplite” infantries of the Carians and Asiatic Greeks. These troops were so called because of their heavy, bronze-faced wooden shields, or *hoplons*, and fought in tightly drawn phalanxes with each man dressed in a full panoply of armor.[¶] Bolstering this core were auxiliaries from the empire’s other subjects, most of whom were rugged mountain tribesmen armed with wicker helmets, small shields, and short spears. More exotic in appearance were the Asiatic Thracians, whose bodies were covered in tattoos and who wore fox-skin headdresses and brightly colored cloaks.²² Of his great allies, Croesus received contingents from Babylonia and Egypt, according to Xenophon.²³ Herodotus does not mention these troops, so many historians doubt they were sent. But Xenophon ascribes a large role in the war to the Egyptian heavy infantry and himself visited towns in Asia Minor occupied by the descendants of these warriors.²⁴ Therefore, we may be confident that Egypt, at least, made a contribution. Absent were the Spartans, whose aid Croesus did not deem necessary until later.

With his forces in tow the Lydian king crossed the Halys into Cappadocia and so commenced his attack on the Persian Empire. He brought his forces against the powerful stronghold of Pteria, which has been tentatively identified with present-day Kerkenes Dag, about 120 miles east of Ankara, where archaeologists have discovered the remains of a massive stone circuit

wall more than four miles in circumference.²⁵ The Lydian army encamped just outside the walls and began ravaging the nearby fields and hamlets. Then, after a siege of unknown duration, the Lydians stormed the fortress. The archaeological evidence indicates that the invaders razed Pteria to the ground, and Herodotus states that Croesus sold its inhabitants into slavery, even though they were guilty of no offense toward him. That Croesus seems not to have encountered any Persian forces in the area has raised questions as to the measure of control that Cyrus and his Median predecessors exercised in Cappadocia. The thinking here is that the land was governed by one or more vassal kings and that, to the extent any Persians were stationed there, they were too few in number to merit mention in the sources.²⁶

Croesus was still at Pteria when Cyrus finally emerged from the mountains of the east at the head of a monstrous host drawn from all the nations that he ruled and perhaps also some Central Asian nomads that had joined him as allies.²⁷ Indeed, Herodotus states that Cyrus was so effective at levying troops on the way to Cappadocia that his army far outnumbered Croesus' by the time the two clashed. Perhaps more important than the Persians' numerical advantage was the new military innovation that Cyrus planned to unleash. If we are to trust Xenophon, it was to battle the Lydians that Cyrus invented the "scythed chariot," a wide, horse-drawn vehicle with long blades attached to the wheel axles and spearheads projecting from the yoke that could plow through ranks of densely packed infantry.²⁸

As he drew near, Cyrus sent riders, both to spy out the Lydian army and to deliver the type of bold

message for which he was famous: Croesus would be forgiven his crimes and further appointed satrap of Lydia if he would simply present himself before Cyrus as one of the Persian king's slaves.²⁹ The incensed Croesus replied in kind with a taunt that may have drawn a smile from Cyrus' lips: it would be more fitting for Cyrus and the Persians to become Croesus' slaves, for hitherto they had been subservient to the Medes, whereas Croesus had never taken orders from another.

The Persians pitched camp at Pteria across from the Lydian army, and for several days the two sides faced each other without exchanging a blow. No doubt, each of the two kings, both seasoned campaigners, was busy sizing up the other's forces. Croesus' main concern must have been the abundance of horsemen and archers in the Persian army. For Cyrus, it was the enemy's unique combination of cavalry and hoplite infantry – a characteristic shared with the later armies of Alexander the Great.

Once settled upon their respective strategies, the two armies held a trial of strength. Herodotus reports that the battle was hotly contested and lasted until dusk, with each side suffering heavy casualties and neither emerging as the victor.³⁰ However, Polyaeus, whose account is more reliable in this respect, provides that the Persians and Lydians fought two battles at Pteria, one in which Croesus won a narrow victory and a second in which he was soundly defeated.³¹

Tenuous though it may have been, the Persian victory changed the course of the war. The campaign season was by now already advanced, and in ancient times, war was a seasonal activity. Not only did

winter's cold make things difficult on campaigning soldiers, but the men were needed at home to tend to their crops in the fall. Furthermore, the Lydians had already destroyed all the potential sources of food in the villages and fields near Pteria, and now that their path forward was blocked by the Persian army, they had no choice but to withdraw. For his part, Cyrus gave no indication that he planned to pursue, so upon returning to Sardis, Croesus disbanded most of his mercenaries and allies with the intention of renewing the war in the coming spring. He dispatched messengers to Egypt, Babylon, and Sparta, and asked them to send additional reinforcements in five months time. Not once did he think that Cyrus, after so close a fight, might venture to move on Sardis, but he had underestimated his adversary.

Whether Cyrus had all along contemplated more than just driving the Lydians out of Cappadocia, Herodotus does not say. However, he would have been acting wholly out of character if he did not intend to carry the war into Lydian territory. Xenophon, for one, attributes to Cyrus an important speech on the value of offensive campaigning:

We shall, however, find the courage of our soldiers much better and stronger, if we assume the offensive and show that we are not unwilling to face the foe; and [our enemies] will be much more afraid of us, when they hear that we do not sit down at home and cower in fear of them, but that, when we hear that they are coming, we advance to meet them to join battle as soon as possible, and do not wait until our country is ravaged but take the initiative and devastate theirs.³²

According to Andrew Burn, Cyrus' decision to invade Lydia exemplified the Persian king's "hold over his troops."³³ The Anatolian highlands were rough

country subject to freezing winds and fierce storms during the winter months. About his own late-season march through nearby Armenia, Xenophon recalls that the cold claimed many lives and that his men had to tie bags to the feet of their horses to prevent them from sinking in the snow.³⁴

But Cyrus was undaunted. He remained at Pteria just long enough to lull the Lydians into thinking hostilities were temporarily over and then set off in pursuit. Herodotus provides that the Persian army moved so swiftly that Cyrus “was his own messenger.”³⁵ It was an impressive feat, and one that became the source of many legends. A century and a half later, Xenophon heard that Cyrus and his Persians were guided at night by a heavenly aura.³⁶ They were in reality a highland people and therefore accustomed to campaigning in mountainous terrain.

When Croesus heard that the Persian army had abruptly appeared in the heart of his kingdom he was thunderstruck. Evil omens had abounded in Sardis ever since Croesus’ return, and now that the enemy was closing in the astonished Lydians feared the worst. But there was cause for optimism yet. The Lydians had proven themselves capable of contending with the Persians on the first day of battle at Pteria, and even though many of their allies had left for home, they could still pin their hopes on the household cavalry. Herodotus implies that Croesus’ horsemen had given Cyrus fits, and this should not surprise us, for the Lydian cavalry had evolved during the lengthy wars that the Mermnad kings had waged against the mounted armies of the east – first the Cimmerians and Scythians and later the Medes. These were the predecessors of the Persians in equestrian

warfare, and as a result, the Lydian horsemen must have been specially trained to cope with the types of cavalry tactics favored by the Persians.

The battlefield where Croesus made his stand was the plain of Thymbrara, as Xenophon calls it, just outside of Sardis along the banks of the Hermus River. Vast, flat, and sparse with trees, the plain was ideal for cavalry maneuvers. The Lydians commenced the battle with a mass cavalry charge, but Cyrus' commanders had anticipated just such a move and devised a brilliant counterstrategy. During the march through Lydia, Harpagus had noticed how the Lydian horses were startled by the camels in the Persian baggage train. This was quite natural, for camels were still foreign to that part of the world, and the horses were not accustomed to their scent. Harpagus had brought this to Cyrus' attention and further proposed that Cyrus move the bag-camels to the front of the army and mount each one with a soldier armed with a spear. This was done and the desired effect achieved. Upon approaching the Persian battle lines, the Lydian horses panicked and stampeded away. Still, the Lydians "did not play the coward."³⁷ Those who could dismounted their steeds and hastily formed ranks to fight the Persians on foot. It was a spirited resistance, but a desperate one. The Lydians suffered mightily from Cyrus' chariots, and only the Egyptians, fighting behind tall wooden shields, were able to resist the Persian counterstrike. Indeed, the Egyptians' courage so impressed Cyrus that he allowed them to lay down their arms and walk away. But Cyrus had given explicit orders before the battle that none of the Lydians save Croesus should be spared, and while many, including the vanquished monarch, managed to

reach the safety of Sardis' walls, the night was filled with the death-cries of those who could not.



Achaemenid seal showing warriors riding a horse and camel, and accompanied by an alert dog. The Persians used dogs in battle, and Cyrus reputedly defeated Croesus by using camel-borne cavalry.

Even in the wake of this crushing defeat, Croesus remained confident that Sardis would hold out. Built around a cliff with sloping outer walls that were sixty-five feet thick at the base and over thirty feet tall, and with several sets of inner fortifications, the citadel was reputed to be impregnable and had sufficient stores of food and water to withstand a lengthy siege.³⁸ Moreover, the Lydian king had managed to get word of his predicament to his allies. Whereas earlier he had instructed the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Spartans to furnish troops for the spring, this time he urged them to send help as soon as possible. The most desperate plea was reportedly directed to Sparta, which was then engaged in a border war with the city-state of Argos. The Spartans indicated that they would gladly help despite their situation, but just as they

were manning their ships, news arrived that Sardis had fallen.

How the Persians captured the formidable Lydian capital so quickly is described by Herodotus.³⁹ After besieging the citadel to no avail for thirteen days, Cyrus sent riders around his army to announce that the first man up the walls would receive a handsome reward. On the fourteenth day, the Persians mounted an all-out assault, but the Lydians warded them off. This setback greatly worried Cyrus, who was concerned about his army's supplies running thin. Fortunately for the Persians, one of his Mardian soldiers named Hyroeades had on the previous day witnessed a Lydian sentry drop his helmet over the battlements. Stationed near the spot where Sardis' wall intersected the rock-face, the Lydian nimbly climbed down the precipice, fetched his helmet, and returned to his post. No one in Cyrus' army had hitherto considered scaling this part of the mountain due to its steepness. But Hyroeades had paid close attention to the path taken by the Lydian, and while the other Persians were resting, he led a company of men up the mountain and onto this stretch of the wall, which was lightly guarded. Where they went, many more followed, and thus, Sardis was seized.⁴⁰

Having gained control of Sardis' citadel, Cyrus turned it over to his troops. Recent excavations at the Lydian capital have revealed evidence of significant fire damage dating to the middle of the sixth century BCE.⁴¹ Providing further testimony as to the violence of the Persian takeover are the skeletal remains of two soldiers discovered inside the city's fortifications. Both soldiers appear to have suffered "parry" fractures to their forearms and to have perished from wounds to

the head and back.⁴² One of the soldiers seems to have died in especially gruesome fashion, with his head hacked twice with a sword and bludgeoned once with an ax or mace. A third skeleton, found in a nearby house, appears to have belonged to a non-combatant who was killed during the looting of the city.

What became of Croesus is something of a mystery. Early in the fifth century BCE, the Attic vase painter, Myson, depicted the Lydian king enthroned atop a pyre about to be lit by one of his servants. This evidence has led some scholars to assert that Croesus must have immolated himself to avoid disgrace at the hands of the Persians.⁴³ However, the Greek authors unanimously agree that Croesus survived the Persian conquest. In the early fifth century BCE the poet Bacchylides wrote that Apollo saved Croesus from burning himself to death by whisking him away to the mythical land of the Hyperboreans.⁴⁴ And both Herodotus and Ctesias provide that Croesus eventually accompanied Cyrus to Iran, with Ctesias stating that Croesus received an estate in the Median town of Barene and a personal retinue of 5,000 cavalry and 10,000 light-infantry.⁴⁵ Based on the foregoing, it seems sensible to think that Croesus attempted suicide once he learned that the Persians had breached Sardis' walls but that Cyrus rescued him from the pyre.⁴⁶



Myson's fifth century BCE vase painting of Croesus preparing to immolate himself upon the pyre. The Lydian king pours oil on the pyre, while a servant named Euthymus sets it ablaze. The painting contradicts Herodotus' statement that Cyrus put the Lydian king on the pyre.

The pillaging that Cyrus had allowed his troops was simply a reward for their rigorous march and other valorous deeds and probably lasted for only a day or two.⁴⁷ Moreover, it must have been limited to certain parts of the city, for the sources agree that the actual withdrawal of Sardis' royal treasures occurred in a systematic fashion with the assistance of the Lydian aristocracy.⁴⁸ Pliny the Elder records that Cyrus seized from Sardis seventeen tons of gold, two hundred fifty tons of silver, numerous metal vases, and the golden "goblet of Semiramis," which weighed fifteen talents (approximately half a ton).⁴⁹ This was an enormous horde by ancient standards and reflected the massive wealth accrued by the Mermnad kings. One source of this wealth was Lydia's historical domination of the land trade between the Aegean

littoral and the countries beyond the Halys. Another was the natural abundance of gold dust and electrum in the native streams, which local legend attributed to a bath taken by the Phrygian king Midas, he of the “golden touch.”⁵⁰ As a result, Sardis’ treasury represented one of the largest gold repositories in the ancient world, and the gold was kept not just in the form of ingots and coins but also as magnificent works of art, the most notorious examples of which included a life-sized plane tree and a large, convoluted vine, with emeralds for leaves and carbuncles for grapes.⁵¹

It was during the emptying of Sardis’ treasury that Croesus is said to have recalled how Apollo had mischievously lured him into war. Seeking permission to reproach the god for his apparent deceit, the dethroned monarch explained to Cyrus the prophecies that he had received and their now manifest meanings: the great empire that Croesus had destroyed by crossing the Halys was his own, and the mule who ruled over the Medes was his half-Persian, half-Median conqueror. Cyrus was reportedly amused by all this, especially, we might imagine, the oracle’s description of him as a mule, and permitted Croesus to send as an insulting gift to Delphi the golden fetters in which he had been bound. However, the Persian king had also learned a valuable lesson. The Lydians and Greeks were superstitious, and if the oracles they took so seriously could be bought, then the Persians could influence local politics. This knowledge Cyrus and his generals put to good use in the coming years, during which they fought hard to establish Persian rule over the remnants of Croesus’ empire.

The Lydian Revolt and the Conquest of Ionia

Cyrus remained in Sardis into the spring. The Lydian capital was unlike any city that he had seen before. Whereas aristocratic Persians traditionally disdained the marketplace, the Lydians were preoccupied with trade and retail, so much so that the working class even prostituted their daughters for income.⁵² In Babylonia, ritual prostitution was tied to the cult of Ishtar, and the Lydian custom may have been similarly associated with the worship of the local fertility goddess, Cybele, the “Mother of All Gods” and “Mistress of All Life.” Of her male devotees Cybele demanded even more: her spring festival culminated in a frenzied Dionysian orgy during which newly initiated priests castrated themselves. Even in the pagan world, Sardis was viewed with contempt as a sensual and decadent place.

Meanwhile, certain peoples of Asia Minor who were anxious to avert war with Croesus’ vanquisher sent emissaries to pay homage to the Persian king. Foremost among those who flocked to Sardis were representatives from the kingdom of Cilicia in southeastern Anatolia.⁵³ Though not as strong as Babylonia or Lydia, this small state commanded the main trade route connecting Asia Minor to Syria and further possessed a powerful fleet. For this reason, the Babylonians had made its annexation a top priority since the time of Nabopolassar. However, the Cilicians had preserved their autonomy, and enmity toward Babylonia had kept them from aligning with Cyrus’ enemies during the Persian-Lydian war. The Greeks called each of the Cilician kings from the beginning of

the sixth to the end of the fifth centuries BCE “Syennesis” – obviously a family name or royal title – and as a reward for the Syennesis’ enthusiastic allegiance, Cyrus never appointed a Persian governor over Cilicia, despite demanding tribute and soldiers for future campaigns. One aspect of Cilicia’s submission captured in the Mesopotamian sources is the cessation of iron exports to Babylonia in 545 BCE, presumably by order of Cyrus in preparation for his campaign against the latter country.⁵⁴

Emissaries also arrived from the Ionians and Aeolians to obtain from Cyrus the same terms of submission that they had previously received from Croesus.** It was perhaps to soften Cyrus to the idea that the Ionian sage Pherecydas composed in his honor the first work of Greek prose and read it before his throne.⁵⁵ But Cyrus was unmoved. He had previously appealed to the Asiatic Greeks for help during the early stages of his conflict with Croesus only to have his overtures rejected. Now, the same people who had supplied troops to his enemy were requesting preferential treatment. The indignant Cyrus responded by recounting a Greek fable that he must have heard only recently: A fisherman had played his flute in order to induce some fish in the sea to dance; when the fish did not, the fisherman cast a net, dragged them ashore, and watching them flop about on the sand exclaimed, “It is too late to dance now. You might have danced to my music – but you would not!”⁵⁶ The story was meant as a threat, and a sharp one at that.

Cyrus’ response alarmed the Ionians, who convened at the Panionium sanctuary near Mount Mycale to discuss what they should do next. The

conference was attended by representatives of all the Ionian cities except Miletus, the submission of which Cyrus had accepted on account of its prudent refusal to provide troops for Croesus' campaign.⁵⁷ The consensus reached at the Panionium was to make a common application to the Spartans for help and for each city to erect defenses in anticipation of a Persian attack (as part of their agreement with Croesus, the Greeks had demolished the walls surrounding their cities).⁵⁸ Although not a party to the council, the Aeolians agreed to this course of action, and thus, for the second time in the span of a few months, the Spartans were asked to hasten to the defense of a people threatened by Persia.

Reluctant to involve themselves in the matter, the Spartans sent ambassadors to Sardis to catch a glimpse of Cyrus and to learn for themselves what his intentions were with respect to the Asiatic Greeks. With his flowing robes, bejeweled crown, and curled beard, the Persian king must have made for an exotic and awe-inspiring sight. It was perhaps with a sense of sheepishness that Lacrines, the chief Spartan ambassador, ordered Cyrus to desist from harming any of the Greek cities on pain of punishment from Sparta! Not amused, Cyrus bluntly turned to some of the Greeks in his retinue and asked who and how numerous the Spartans were that they dared to send such a command. Upon being informed, he answered the Spartans derisively: "I have never yet been afraid of men who have a special meeting place in the center of their city, where they swear this and that and cheat each other. Such people, if *I* have anything to do with it, will not have merely the troubles of Ionia to chatter about, but their own!"⁵⁹ Cyrus intended this remark as

a criticism, not just of the Spartans, but of all the Greeks, who, like the Lydians, prided themselves on their cunning in the marketplace. If we are to believe Diodorus, Cyrus went so far as to dismiss the Spartans by declaring that he would judge their valor in due time by sending one of his own generals to conquer Greece.⁶⁰

The Persian king returned to Ecbatana soon thereafter, taking Croesus and the bulk of the Lydian treasures with him. His departure must have been hasty, given that he did not leave behind a military force strong enough to properly guard Sardis or subjugate the Greeks. Herodotus explains the event in terms of Cyrus' burning desire to undertake other, more important expeditions that required the use of centrally located Persia and Media as operational headquarters: "He did not think the Ionians important enough to constitute a primary objective, for his mind was on Babylon and the Bactrians and the Sakas and the Egyptians, against whom he intended to lead an expedition in person. Some other commander would suffice to tackle the Ionians."⁶¹ Despite Herodotus' tone, we cannot be sure that Cyrus' designs against these nations stemmed from sheer ambition. Babylonia and Egypt had sided with Croesus in the war against Persia, and the Bactrians and their Saka allies had only recently been placated. Therefore, the Persian king may well have been reacting to what he perceived as genuine threats to his burgeoning empire. Moreover, Herodotus elsewhere hints that Cyrus feared unrest in Persia.⁶² Such apprehension was reasonable, since, in ancient times, the prolonged absence of a monarch from his capital usually invited rebellion among his subjects. That Cyrus would have

been particularly sensitive to this threat makes sense given the circumstances surrounding his own rise to power and the likely persistence of old rivalries between the recently unified Persian tribes.

Cyrus did not leave before installing the Persian Tabalus as the commander of Sardis' citadel and the Lydian Pactyes, presumably one of Croesus' high-ranking officials, in charge of the country's finances. Here we have an early example of Achaemenid provincial administration, a hallmark of which was the close cooperation of Persian and local officials. Unfortunately for Cyrus, this arrangement proved disastrous in the case of Lydia, for no sooner had the Persian king disappeared into the east than Pactyes raised the standard of revolt. The Lydian rebel took the funds that were available to him, went down to the Aegean coast, hired mercenaries, and incited the Ionians and Aeolians, who were already gearing up for war, to advance as an army against Sardis. Without a comparable force of his own, all Tabalus could do was shut himself up in the citadel and send word to the king, who was still on the road.

When Cyrus caught wind of Pactyes' betrayal, he became greatly incensed. "What will be the end of all this for me?" he asked Croesus. "For I don't suppose that the Lydians will stop being a nuisance to me – and to themselves too for that matter. I am not at all sure that the best thing would not be to make slaves of them. As things are, I seem to have acted like a man who kills a father and spares the sons; for you, who were more than a father to the Lydians, are now my prisoner, and to the Lydians themselves I have made a present of Sardis – and then feel surprised that they are not loyal to me."⁶³

Fearing that Cyrus intended to bring ruin upon his people, Croesus answered, “My lord, your argument is reasonable enough; nevertheless I beg you not to indulge your anger without restraint, or destroy an ancient city which is not responsible for the present situation anymore than for what happened previously. The previous offence was my own: I was the guilty one, and I am paying the penalty for it; this time the villain is Pactyes, in whose charge you put Sardis. So it is Pactyes you should punish. As for the Lydians, forgive them – but at the same time, if you want to keep them loyal and to prevent any danger from them in future, I suggest you put a veto upon their possession of arms. Make them wear tunics under their cloaks, and high boots, and tell them to teach their sons to play the zither and harp, and to start shopkeeping. If you do that, my lord, you will soon see them turn into women instead of men, and there will not be any danger of them rebelling against you.”⁶⁴ Herodotus maintains that Croesus gave this advice because he thought it better for the Lydians to live in effeminacy than to be destroyed by the Persians. Cyrus reportedly agreed and dispatched to Lydia a detachment of troops under the command of the Median general Mazares with orders to disarm the Lydians, enslave Pactyes’ soldiers, and, at all costs, take Pactyes himself alive.

Herodotus provides a brief outline of what happened next: Mazares drove the rebels away from Sardis with relative ease; Pactyes and his followers fled to Aeolian Cyme; and the Lydians peacefully surrendered their weapons, “as a result of which they altered from that moment their whole way of life.”⁶⁵ But how reliable is this account? Because the Lydians

provided hoplites for the army that Xerxes led to Greece in 480 BCE, their disarmament could hardly have been permanent. On the other hand, the vaunted Lydian cavalry did not participate in Xerxes' campaign and is, in fact, never heard of again after Cyrus' reign. This bit of information has led a few scholars to surmise that Mazares either destroyed or disenfranchised that class of the Lydian aristocracy that used to furnish cavalry for the Mermnad kings.⁶⁶ That many Lydian nobles were, indeed, deprived of their estates during Cyrus' reign seems evident from the appearance of Iranian settlers in and around Lydia's prime agricultural areas.⁶⁷

Having restored the situation at Sardis, Mazares proceeded with the manhunt, sending messengers to Cyme demanding Pactyes' extradition. The Cymians, in turn, consulted the oracle of Apollo at Didyma, to determine whether they should surrender their suppliant.⁶⁸ This oracle was connected via a picturesque, statue-lined walkway to Miletus, the only Ionian city to make peace with Cyrus. The Branchidae family that looked after the oracle seems already to have established close ties with the Persians, for when the question of Pactyes was posed, the "god" replied that the fugitive should be handed over. Healthy skepticism regarding the political affiliations of the oracle must already have abounded, for the Cymians sent a second embassy to confirm whether Apollo really recommended a breach of hospitality. When the oracle's response did not change, one disillusioned Cymian began shooing away the birds that had nested inside the temple. This raised the ire of the god, who declared in a booming voice, "Vilest of men, how dare you do this? Will you rob my temple of those who

take refuge with me?” To this, the Cymian responded with the question that he had all along planned to ask, “Lord, will you save your own suppliants, yet tell the men of Cyme to deliver up theirs?” “Yes,” the flummoxed god replied, “I do command them, so that you may perish all the sooner for your impiety and never again come to inquire of my oracle about giving up those that seek refuge with you.”⁶⁹

Despite the presumptive protests of those Cymians who understood the oracle’s fraud, the rest of the townsmen, frightened by Apollo’s threat of destruction, determined that they could no longer harbor Pactyes and therefore sent him away to the island of Chios. Here, the Lydian fugitive was presumably safe, because the Persians did not yet possess a fleet. But Mazares had caught on to the Greeks’ susceptibility to bribery, a trait that would plague them for centuries to come in their dealings with Persia, and arranged to have the Chians surrender Pactyes in return for a stretch of fertile farmland on the Anatolian coast. Upon learning that the Persians had brokered a deal, the guilt-stricken Cymians sent a ship to rescue Pactyes, but it was too late. The Chians dragged Pactyes out of the temple in which he was hiding and delivered him to the Persians.⁷⁰

What became of the rabble-rouser is unknown. Cyrus had wanted him alive to make an example of him, so it is likely that Pactyes suffered the same horrible fate as the “Kings of the Lie,” the rebel leaders whose torture and execution Darius I vividly describes in the Bisutun Inscription.⁷¹ Pactyes was at any rate a more formidable foe than Herodotus lets on, as evidenced by the Persians’ dogged efforts to

apprehend him and the vicious reprisals that they meted out in the aftermath of his revolt.

With Pactyes out of the picture, Mazares set out to punish the Greek cities that had participated in the rebellion. He attacked Ionian Priene and sold a good portion of its male population into slavery. His army next ravaged the valley of the Maeander River and the plain outside Magnesia, after which the Median commander fell ill and died. If the Ionians and Aeolians expected a reprieve from his death, they were sorely mistaken. Cyrus, who must have been in Iran by now, sent Harpagus, with the title “Commander of the Sea-Coast,” to resume the offensive.⁷² Whereas the military force that Mazares had led was relatively small, a mere detachment of Cyrus’ army, Harpagus seems to have arrived with an army of his own, which is not surprising given his esteemed position with the king.

The Persian high command understood that the Greeks were unable, or unwilling, to join forces at this time. This was good news for the Persians, because a united Greek army with a sizable hoplite phalanx would have presented a difficult challenge. But age-old feuds lingered between the various city-states, and the conferences at the Panionium and similar venues often resulted in more deliberation than decision. Just as importantly, Apollo had already revealed his allegiance to Persia during the Pactyes affair and continued to betray his people when Harpagus arrived. Decades later Darius I would upbraid one of his officers for burdening the priests of “the god who has earned the favor of my ancestors and spoken the truth to the Persians.”⁷³

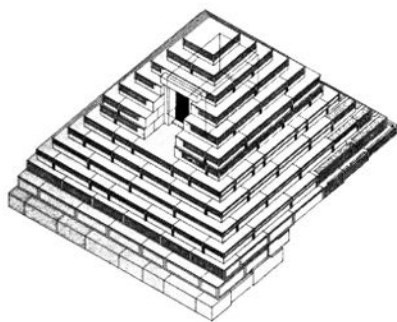
The strongest of the Ionian cities was Phocaea, the

only site permitted by Croesus to retain its original fortifications, and that was where Harpagus struck first.⁷⁴ Harpagus' favorite siege tactic was to build a large earthen mound from which his troops could scale the enemy defenses. This was time-consuming, however, and at Phocaea, the Median commander needed a quick victory, so as to dishearten the other Greeks. So after driving the Phocaeans behind its walls, he offered to spare the city if the inhabitants would, in a symbolic gesture of surrender, demolish a single bastion of their fortifications and dedicate one house within the city to the Persians. The Phocaeans replied that they needed a day to deliberate, during which Harpagus must move his army away from the city. Harpagus agreed, even though he claimed to know what the Phocaeans intended to do. Thereupon, says Herodotus, the Phocaeans gathered their women, children, and movable possessions into their ships and sailed away, first to Chios and then to Corsica where they eventually settled. The inhabitants of Teos reportedly acted in a similar fashion when Harpagus breached their walls and migrated to Thracia in Europe. Although Herodotus obviously dramatized the fates of these cities – too many Phocians and Teians were around at the time of the Ionian Revolt (499–494 BCE) for either city to have been entirely vacated in 544 BCE – a number of Greeks may well have chosen to live overseas rather than under Persian rule. In fact, the Asiatic Greeks seriously discussed resettlement to Sardinia as a means of escaping Achaemenid domination some fifty years after their subjugation.⁷⁵

Regarding Harpagus' campaigns against the remaining Ionian cities, Herodotus simply provides:

“The rest of the Ionians, except the Milesians, though they faced Harpagus in battle as did the exiles, and conducted themselves well, each fighting for his own country, yet, when they were defeated and their cities taken, they remained where they were and did as they were told . . . Thus Ionia was enslaved for the second time.”⁷⁶ The strategy of divide and conquer had paid off.

The fall of the coastal cities caused some of the Greek islands in the eastern Aegean to offer earth and water, the standard tokens of submission, to the Persians. Our sources unfortunately fail to identify which islands these were and what their submission actually entailed. Because Darius I preoccupied himself with solidifying Persian rule in the Aegean, Cyrus could hardly have exercised any real control over the seas.⁷⁷ Yet, many islands near the Asiatic coast had commercial and territorial interests on the mainland, and the fact Cambyses II expected the Samian tyrant Polycrates and other island lords to provide ships for his Egyptian campaign of 525 BCE suggests that, already under Cyrus, the Persians could manipulate matters on the mainland to coerce the islanders into serving the king.⁷⁸



Line drawing of the so-called “Pyramid Tomb” at Sardis. The tomb almost certainly belonged to one of

Cyrus' officers. Some scholars have ventured to state that this was the tomb of Abradates and Panthea. According to Xenophon's fanciful account, Abradates died in battle outside Sardis, after which his grief-stricken wife Panthea, reputedly the most beautiful woman in Asia, committed suicide. This tomb loosely resembles the one that Cyrus built for himself at Pasargadae.

Additional Conquests in Asia Minor

After conquering Ionia, Harpagus bore down against the inhabitants of southwestern Anatolia: the Carians, Lycians, and Caunians. These were native tribes that had intermingled to varying degrees with the Greek colonists who lived along the coast.

The greatest settlement in Caria was Herodotus' home-city of Halicarnassus. Herodotus credits the Carians with inventing hoplite warfare, and some scholars accept this as fact.⁷⁹ Perhaps then it was to fight fire with fire that Harpagus brought along for this expedition heavy infantry recruited from the recently subdued Ionian and Aeolian cities (the Aeolians had been conquered at about the same time as the Ionians). Herodotus has surprisingly little to say about the subjugation of his homeland. The Persian war machine was apparently operating at full tilt, and as the Halicarnassian historian relates, the inhabitants of Caria failed to put up a noteworthy fight.

Dread of Persian chastisement prompted the citizens of Cnidus, a Spartan colony situated on a small isthmus overlooking the island of Rhodes, to start digging a canal that would have separated their city from the mainland. Had they succeeded, the

Persians would have been hard pressed to take Cnidus without mounting a serious naval operation. But Apollo intervened once more, and the oracle at Delphi reminded the industrious Cnidians that “Zeus would have given you an island, if he had wanted to.”⁸⁰ Work on the canal stopped immediately, and the city surrendered once Harpagus arrived.

Farther inland the resistance was more resolute. The Pedaseans who lived “above Halicarnassus” fortified the mountain of Lide and were only defeated at length. Afterward, Harpagus invaded the plain of Xanthus, which belonged to the Lycians, warlike descendants of the once mighty Hittites. According to Herodotus, Xanthus had been largely evacuated in anticipation of Harpagus’ attack, but those who remained were determined to “do or die.”⁸¹ The outnumbered defenders gathered their women and children in the citadel, burned it to the ground, and then, after making strong oaths, sallied out into the field, where the Persians killed them to a man. Herodotus’ account of Xanthus’ fall is sometimes viewed as an embellishment. However, the Persians clearly settled peoples from other parts of their empire in and around Xanthus, and they may have done so to repopulate the city.⁸² “The people of Caunus,” Herodotus provides, “followed in most respects the example of the Lycians, and their town fell into Harpagus’ hands in much the same way as Xanthus did.”⁸³

Between 544 BCE and 539 BCE, Harpagus and his generals waged additional campaigns in Asia Minor. The force of their conquests may be discerned from the ruins of Gordion – on the main road between Lydia and Cappadocia – where archaeologists have

discovered numerous arrowheads, the remains of a massive siege ramp, and the bodies of slain combatants near the city's outer walls.⁸⁴ By this time, there was no escaping Persian rule, for as Herodotus states, "while Harpagus was turning upside-down the lower, or western, part of Asia, Cyrus was engaged in the north and east, bringing into subjection every nation without exception."⁸⁵

§ The son of Leto was the god Apollo. Alyattes was the father of Croesus, the Lydian king whom Cyrus vanquished.

¶ The phalanx was a battle formation in which each soldier locked shields with the person next to him to create a wall of bronze, and the soldiers projected their spears over the first rank of shields to form a "spear hedge." The formation's utility depended entirely upon the impenetrability of the shield-wall, such that phalangites had to move in perfect unison, which required extreme discipline.

** The nature of these terms is not entirely clear. Drawing upon information presented by Herodotus and Xenophon, Cawkwell (2005), 31–32, concludes that Croesus had required all the Greek cities of Asia, except for Miletus, to pay tribute, and that even Miletus was not exempt from the requirement to provide soldiers for the Lydian army. By contrast, Balcer (1984), 91, characterizes Miletus' status under Lydian rule as that of a "subjugated ally," which, like other Ionian and Aeolian cities, had to provide both tribute and soldiers to the Lydians.

The Sun and the Sky: Iranian Religion in the Age of Cyrus

Ahuramazda spoke unto Spitama Zarathushtra, saying: “Verily, when I created Mithra, the Lord of Wide Pastures, O Spitama, I created him as worthy of sacrifice, as worthy of prayer as myself, Ahuramazda.”

—Avestan Hymn to Mithra

Having returned from Lydia to Ecbatana, Cyrus made the necessary preparations for his further campaigns. However, he must also have closely monitored social conditions in Media, where the overthrow of Astyages had signaled, in addition to a momentous political transition, a rather important, yet poorly understood, religious one. Any evaluation of this religious upheaval must involve a discussion of the faiths espoused by the Medes and Persians, as well as Cyrus’ own religious beliefs. In the absence of direct evidence, the arguments for and against Cyrus’ adherence to any particular ancient Iranian religion are predictably complicated and have spurred much debate among scholars.

According to Ctesias, Astyages died soon after the conqueror's return from Lydia, and Cyrus must have been apprehensive that the former king's passing might cause a flaring-up of tensions between the Medes and Persians.¹ We know, for example, that Darius I had to fight hard at the outset of his reign to prevent the powerful Median aristocracy from reviving the great northern empire. The usurper who deposed Cambyses II and claimed the throne in 522 BCE seems to have upheld Median political interests. After Darius slew him, two other rebels, each claiming descent from the Median king Cyaxares, raised the standard of revolt. Darius overcame these rebellions only with great difficulty, and he exacted a terrible revenge upon the two upstarts. In ancient Iran, religion and politics were closely intertwined, and these movements toward Median independence coincided with religious hostilities. The usurper who ruled as Bardiya destroyed certain *ayadana*, or "places of worship," in Persia and other lands that Darius rebuilt.² Then, after seizing power, Darius purged a sect of the Median Magi that had resisted the Persian takeover.³ As these events suggest, important religious differences existed between the Medes and Persians throughout the sixth century BCE.

That Cyrus also had to deal with these religious differences may be deduced not just from historical circumstance but also, perhaps, from a study of the ruins of Tepe Nush-e Jan near Ecbatana. The original structure at this Median site was a large temple that once "stood in splendid isolation" atop a scenic outcrop.⁴ Like other Median settlements, Tepe Nush-e Jan was probably deserted before the second half of the sixth century BCE. The tendency among scholars

has been to link the desertion of these sites to internal developments within the Median Empire. But different circumstances may have spurred the abandonment of Tepe Nush-e Jan, for it was not just deserted but entirely immured, never to be used again. The temple was packed with shale and encased in mud-brick, and the entrances to the other buildings at the site were sealed. David Stronach and Michael Roaf, the archaeologists who originally studied the site, dated its formal closure to the end of the seventh century BCE.⁵ However, John Curtis of the British Museum has argued that the shutdown took place for religious reasons soon after Cyrus conquered Media: “The obvious moment would be when power was transferred from the Medes to the Persians in c. 550 BCE, resulting almost certainly in the introduction of some slightly different religious practices.”⁶ Assuming Curtis to be correct, we might surmise that Cyrus’ victory over Astyages heralded, in addition to a momentous political change, an important period of religious transition.

To examine these religious developments and their historical significance, we must explore Cyrus’ own beliefs and the degree to which religion influenced his actions. At the heart of the problem is the question of whether Cyrus was a Zoroastrian – that is, an adherent of the religion espoused by the prophet Zoroaster. In attempting to answer this fundamental question, we must digress into a brief discussion of Zoroaster’s teachings and the religious landscape of Iran during the Median and Achaemenid periods. It is here that problems immediately abound, for Zoroaster represents, perhaps, the single most enigmatic figure in Iranian history, as neither the

dates nor the location of his ministry can be established with certainty. Resolving these and other matters dealt with in this chapter requires lengthy and complex discussions, which are nevertheless worthwhile in order to discern a critical facet of Cyrus' personality and an important aspect of his legacy.

Prophet Zoroaster and His Message

The debate concerning when Zoroaster lived revolves around the validity of the so-called "traditional date." This chronology appears in the writings of the early Moslem scholars and the *Bundahishn*, a compilation of Zoroastrian literature from post-Sasanid times. It holds that Zoroaster "arrived" 258 years before the advent of Macedonian rule in Iran, reckoned to have commenced with Alexander's destruction of Persepolis in 330 BCE or the founding of the Seleucid Empire in 311 BCE.⁷ The traditional date thus makes Zoroaster a contemporary of Cyrus, rendering it highly unlikely that the latter followed the prophet's teachings. However, good reasons exist for doubting this chronology, which seems to have originated in Babylonian circles and to have conflated Zoroaster's activity with the Persian conquest of Babylon (539 BCE).⁸ Most experts now agree that Zoroaster predated the Achaemenids by several centuries, although exactly how many remains uncertain. According to Eudoxus of Cnidus, a contemporary of Aristotle, Zoroaster flourished six thousand years before Plato. This date is roughly consistent with the chronology of Xanthus of Lydia,

who has Zoroaster live six thousand years before the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE.⁹ Such calculations are clearly fantastic and reflect the notion, grounded in Iranian millenarian beliefs, that Zoroaster's soul was created six thousand years before the apocalypse.¹⁰ But if the six thousand years mentioned by Xanthus represents a textual error, such that the correct number is six hundred, as some scholars believe, then the Lydian historian may be deemed to advocate a date of 1080 BCE for the prophet.¹¹ Comparative linguistics support such an "early date" for the prophet, insofar as grammatical similarities between the languages of the Old Avesta and the Rig Veda suggest that the former text was composed soon after the Iranians and Indo-Aryans separated in the early to mid-second millennium BCE.¹²

Regarding Zoroaster's provenance, the Avesta contains several ethnic and place names, all but one or two of which belong to eastern Iran.¹³ The natural conclusion is that the prophet, too, must have hailed from this region. As to a more specific location, the Young Avesta contains two lists of countries that may provide clues. One list appears in the *Videvdatta*, or "Anti-Demonic Law," and seems to trace the migration of Iranian tribes from Central Asia to southern Afghanistan.¹⁴ The migration begins in the so-called "Aryan Abode by the River of Good Religious Law," where later tradition remembers Zoroaster as having received his first revelation, and proceeds through Sogdiana, Margiana, Bactria, and Areia, among other countries. The second list occurs in the all-important *Mihir Yasht*, or "Hymn to Mithra," and resembles the *Videvdatta* list, except that Chorasmia's name appears

where one would expect mention of the Aryan Abode.¹⁵ Because the Avestan people are believed to have migrated from a common homeland, it has been argued that Chorasmia should be equated with the Aryan Abode.¹⁶ This interpretation finds support in an Old Avestan song in which Zoroaster praises the descendants of Friya the Turanian.¹⁷ According to the seventh century CE Armenian scholar Ananias of Shirak, the Turanians originally inhabited a canton in Chorasmia.¹⁸ Ananias' testimony is hardly dispositive, however, and different arguments exist for placing Zoroaster in Bactria, Sogdiana, Sistan, eastern Media, or elsewhere.

Setting aside the difficult questions of where and when Zoroaster lived, the central tenets of his religion are clearly set forth in the Gathas. The Gathas consist of seventeen Old Avestan songs, divided into five groups based on poetic meter. The most ancient and sacred portion of the Avesta, the Gathas are believed to have been composed by Zoroaster himself. Through the Gathas, the revolutionary nature of Zoroaster's philosophy becomes clear. The old Indo-Iranian religion, which Zoroaster sought to reform, focused primarily on cultic rituals dedicated to two classes of deities, the Ahuras and the Daivas. The Ahuras were the more ethical and lofty of the two and functioned mainly to order the cosmos. By contrast, the Daivas were amoral and played a direct role in human affairs and the rudimentary aspects of nature. Zoroaster eliminated this hierarchy by denouncing the Daivas as false gods and merging the positive attributes of the Ahuras into one supreme being: Ahuramazda, the "Lord of Wisdom" or "Wise Lord." Two points bear immediate mention here. First, a cult of Ahuramazda

may have preceded Zoroaster, such that the prophet perhaps only elevated the status of an existing deity, as opposed to advocating the worship of a new one.¹⁹ Second, the opposite of the Zoroastrian reform occurred in India, where the Daivas were exalted and the Ahuras demonized. Zoroaster's purpose in condemning the Daivas was to redirect society's misguided emphasis on ritual toward the importance of ethics. To this end, he made Ahuramazda the champion and embodiment of a cosmic force called *Asha*, meaning "Truth," "Righteousness," or "Order." Diametrically opposed to this positive force was the negative impulse of *Druj*, or "the Lie." The conflict between Truth and the Lie had its roots in the old Indo-Iranian religion but was never so pronounced there as in Zoroastrianism.

Despite a tone that at times seems monotheistic, the Gathas do not deny the existence of other deities.[†] In addition to Ahuramazda, Zoroaster worshipped the Amesha Spentas, or "Holy Immortals," although these may have been mere emanations of the Wise Lord.²⁰ The seven high Amesha Spentas were Vohu Manah (Good Thought), Asha Vahishta (Best Righteousness), Khshathra Vairya (Desirable Dominion), Spenta Armaiti (Holy Devotion), Haurvatat (Wholeness), Ameretat (Immortality), and Spenta Mainyu (Holy Spirit). As their names suggest, these entities signified the principles by which man should act, as well as the attributes that he should strive to achieve, both in this world and the next: through devotion, good thought, and righteousness, man's spirit becomes holy and attains dominion, wholeness, and immortality. The most important Amesha Spenta was Spenta Mainyu, the demiurge through whom Ahuramazda

implemented his creative powers at the dawn of time; Zoroaster deemed this demiurge necessary, because Ahuramazda himself resided in the abstract realm, the “World of Thought,” and not the “Material” or “Skeletal World” that comprises this universe. So significant was Spenta Mainyu that later Zoroastrians considered him to be identical to Ahuramazda.²¹

Despite their importance, the Amesha Spentas were still secondary to Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda was the only timeless god and the only deity whom Zoroaster addressed with the sacred title “Creator.” One Gatha emphasizes Ahuramazda’s creative powers through a series of rhetorical questions about the order of the universe:

This I ask thee, O Lord, answer me truly, who was the first father of righteousness at the [creation]? Who appointed their path to sun and stars? Who but thou is it through whom the moon waxes and wanes? This I would know, O Wise One, and other things, too!

Who set the earth in its place below, and the sky of the clouds, that it shall not fall? Who [set] the waters and the plants? Who yoked the two steeds to the wind and clouds? Who, O Wise One, is the creator of the Good Mind?

What craftsman made light and darkness, what craftsman made sleep and waking? Who made morning, noon, and night, to remind the wise man of his task?²²

So Zoroaster recognized Ahuramazda through the symmetry of the cosmos and revered him as the fountainhead of all good creation. But what about evil and the Lie?

Zoroaster must have dwelled considerably on the thorny theological problem posed by the presence of negative, disorderly forces in the universe. Rather than attribute their origin to the mercurial will of a good god (as in the Abrahamic tradition), Zoroaster

preached the existence of an evil divinity called Angra Mainyu (New Persian *Ahriman*), the “Malevolent,” “Black,” or “Noxious Spirit,” the irreconcilable enemy of all that is good.²³ Later tradition casts Angra Mainyu as the timeless counterpart of Ahuramazda. However, the Gathas introduce him as Spenta Mainyu’s twin, an early creation of Ahuramazda who *chose* to follow the Lie.²⁴ For each of Ahuramazda’s good creations, Angra Mainyu devises an evil counter-creation intended to contaminate Truth and advance the Lie. Thus, the powers of good and evil square off until the end of time.

The stark dualism at the heart of Zoroastrianism represents, perhaps, the religion’s most fundamental doctrine. Later generations cited it to classify all things, including the most minute actions or phenomena, as either Good, Truthful, and Orderly or Bad, Deceitful, and Disorderly. Thus, in the Young Avesta and the Pahlavi texts, the cosmic struggle between Truth and the Lie manifests itself in the changing of the seasons, human behavior, and aesthetic appearances. Although Zoroaster himself viewed the matter strictly on an ethical or spiritual plane, he too recognized a strong association between light and Truth. The old Indo-Iranian religion had featured elements of nature worship and a special cult of fire. For Zoroaster, fire became the symbol of Truth and the elemental intermediary between man and god. Consequently, Zoroastrians have always treated fire with respect and have used it in all their high ceremonies, causing their enemies to disparage them as “fire-worshippers.”

Zoroaster attributed an important role to man in the war between Truth and the Lie. In the Zoroastrian

scheme, man is completely independent to think and act as he pleases and can influence the immediate stages of the great cosmic struggle. A pious man can assist Ahuramazda by acting in accordance with Truth through “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.”²⁵ By contrast, an evil man who thinks, speaks, and acts badly advances the Lie and helps Angra Mainyu.

Like Christ, Zoroaster understood that the pious are often made to suffer at the hands of the wicked and that, in this world, the wicked are often mightier than the pure of heart. The prophet seems to have grown up in a peaceful pastoral community, frequently terrorized by roving war bands.[‡] Furthermore, he endured much personal anguish while propagating Ahuramazda’s message. His own family and friends excommunicated him, when, at the age of thirty, he returned from a lonely sojourn in the wilderness to describe his first revelation. For twelve years thereafter he wandered aimlessly in search of a patron, always the object of ridicule among the karapans, the chief cultists of the old gods, and their followers. Not until Kavi Vishtaspa, the ruler or spiritual leader of a distant tribe, accepted the Good Religion did Zoroaster’s luck begin to change, but even then, war between Vishtaspa’s followers and the hostile non-believers led to much misery and bloodshed.²⁶

Given these experiences, Zoroaster preached a message of endurance and hope. One Gathic song fancifully depicts his call to prophethood as occurring during the sacrifice of a pregnant cow.²⁷ Cattle served an important function in ancient Iranian society and were a mark of wealth. At the same time, they were

used in rituals as sacrificial animals. The mighty, those with more cattle, were likelier to offer up more beasts to the gods, and certain forms of bovine sacrifice subjected the animals to terrible pain. In the Gathic song, the soul of the pregnant cow calls out to Ahuramazda, begging him to appoint a protector to save it from torment at the hands of the very men it succors with its milk and meat. Ahuramazda responds by summoning Zoroaster to protect the cow, a declaration that initially disappoints the animal, which was hoping for a stronger advocate. With its focus on the torture of a helpless, docile creature by powerful aggressors, the entire song serves as an allegory for the difficulties facing the pious. The material world is cruel, and the pious must persevere. However, their suffering is not in vain. Ahuramazda will surely triumph over the Lie, and when he does, all mankind will be put to the test, or so the prophet taught.

The old Indo-Iranian religion offered little hope of a joyous afterlife for the vast majority of people. It was believed that, upon death, the souls of all women, children, and lay folk would descend into a gloomy netherworld, and that heaven was attainable only for those nobles and priests who had satiated the gods with lavish sacrifices.²⁸ Care and consideration for one's fellow man had little to do with personal salvation. By contrast, Zoroaster seems to have envisioned a final judgment in which the whole of humanity would be resurrected and compelled to cross a molten river.²⁹ The pious would emerge from the river unscathed, as if they had waded through warm milk, but the wicked would perish in flames or, at the very least, be burned until their sins were

absolved. This account of the final judgment represents one of two referenced in the Gathas. The other has Zoroaster himself guide each soul across a bridge leading to the heavens. For Ahuramazda's faithful, the bridge is made broad, and the soul ascends into the World of Thought, where it attains the "Best Existence," an immortal afterlife in the "House of Good Mind" (also called the "House of Song")³⁰ As for the wicked, the bridge shrinks to the width of a razor's edge, and the soul plummets into the "House of Worst Mind" (also called the "House of the Lie"), there to suffer eternal damnation in Angra Mainyu's hellish abode.³¹

The Return of the Old Indo-Iranian Gods

Such was Zoroaster's religion, in broad-brush. It was lofty, abstract, and novel at core, qualities that made it difficult to grasp for the masses, who continued to take comfort in the time-tested rituals dedicated to the old gods. As a former priest of the Indo-Iranian religion, Zoroaster knew how to rework the doctrines of the pagan faith to suit his calling. During the generations immediately after his death, the leaders of the Zoroastrian community deliberately diluted the prophet's message to attract a broader following. These concessions resulted in many of the old gods whose worship Zoroaster had neglected or even condemned to be exonerated and reintroduced into the pantheon as creations and supporters of Ahuramazda.³² Because Zoroaster had so forcefully derogated "Daiva-worship" – a term which came to connote, in addition to the veneration of the Daivas,

any form of ritual deemed improper by Zoroastrian standards – the reinstated gods were rebranded as “Yazatas,” or “(Entities) Worthy of Sacrifice.” These developments find full expression in the Young Avesta but are also reflected, in a less advanced state, in certain Old Avestan texts that postdate the Gathas. Hence, the process of religious degeneration almost certainly began before Zoroastrianism had spread beyond eastern Iran.³³

Cyrus the Zoroastrian?

The earliest explicit reference to Cyrus’ Zoroastrianism occurs in the writings of Xanthus of Lydia, who provides that the Persian founder refrained from burning Croesus on the pyre due to Zoroaster’s proscription against polluting fire. Xanthus was a contemporary of Herodotus, who lived during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BCE). Artaxerxes appears to have been an exemplary patron of Zoroastrianism, and many scholars credit him with replacing the Old Persian calendar, a relic of the pagan past, with a calendar in which the months were named after Zoroastrian divinities.³⁴ Accordingly, caution is necessary in evaluating Xanthus’ testimony, as the Lydian historian may have simply attributed the beliefs of Artaxerxes to the imperial founder.

A more reliable method of ascertaining Cyrus’ faith involves analyzing the evidence regarding Darius I, who came to power within eight years of Cyrus’ death, and his son Xerxes I. This step is necessary, because no direct evidence from the reigns of Darius’

predecessors has survived. The Old Persian inscriptions commissioned by Darius and Xerxes are particularly instructive in illuminating the Zoroastrian faith of their authors.³⁵ Written in the native language of Persia, these inscriptions were carved in various parts of Iran and cast the monarchs in the light in which they wished to be seen by their fellow countrymen. It is therefore telling that Ahuramazda is the only god that Darius and Xerxes mention by name. The existence of other gods is alluded to in phrases such as “Ahuramazda, who is the chief of the gods” and “Ahuramazda and the other gods who are,” but these lesser deities are never identified, presumably because they do not merit attention. Such singular focus contrasts sharply with the typical practice of ancient Near Eastern rulers who followed purely polytheistic religions.³⁶ The exaltation of Ahuramazda by Darius and Xerxes is all the more revealing, because throughout history Zoroastrians have used the term *Mazdayasni*, or “Mazda-worshipping,” to distinguish themselves from other religious groups that either neglected the Wise Lord altogether or accorded him secondary status behind other deities.³⁷ Consistent with their veneration of Ahuramazda, Darius and Xerxes begin most of their inscriptions by praising the Wise Lord as the “great god . . . who created this earth, who created that sky, who created man, who created happiness for man.”³⁸ This standard introduction evokes Zoroaster’s perception of Ahuramazda as the original Creator of the cosmos. It declares the kings’ opposition to the old pagan mythology, in which multiple gods performed creative acts.³⁹ The prophet’s dualistic philosophy also appears in the kings’ averred reverence for Truth (Old Persian

Hashiya) and Order (Old Persian *Arta*) and opposition to the Daivas and the Lie (Old Persian *Drauga*). In particular, these kings, like Zoroaster, envision the Lie as an independent force and not just the result of one's personal actions.⁴⁰ Finally, the two kings urge man to live piously in order to be happy in life and *Artavan* when dead.⁴¹ The use of the term *Artavan* is significant, because it represents the Old Persian cognate of Avestan *Ashavan*, a word employed frequently in the Gathas to connote "oneness with *Asha*" (that is, "to be holy," "to be blessed").⁴² These textual similarities demonstrate that Darius and his son were familiar with, and generally accepting of, Zoroaster's message.⁴³ The common counterargument that the inscriptions show only that Darius and Xerxes followed a religion untouched by Zoroastrianism that nevertheless focused on the worship of Ahuramazda carries little weight. After all, there is no evidence that the pagan cult of Ahuramazda – commonly referred to as "Mazdaism" – shared the same basic doctrines as Zoroastrianism. As John Manuel Cook has concluded, "the god of Darius was of course the god of Zoroaster," plain and simple, and because their inscriptions contain little trace of the paganism rampant in the Young Avesta, one might think that Darius and Xerxes adhered to a purer form of Zoroastrianism more attuned to the spirit of the Gathas than the devolved faith apparent in later years.⁴⁴

But what about Cyrus? Because the aforementioned inscriptions were all commissioned after his death, doubts linger as to his faith. The Old Persian inscriptions carved in Cyrus' name shed no light on his religious beliefs. Cyrus' Babylonian

inscriptions are equally unhelpful. As purely political pieces intended to legitimize Cyrus in the manner of a native Babylonian ruler, they emphasize the king's devotion to Mesopotamian gods. That the devoutly Zoroastrian Darius also honored foreign deities in his Egyptian proclamations proves how little help Babylonian inscriptions are for purposes of ascertaining Cyrus' religious convictions.

Because Darius is the first Achaemenid emperor to mention Ahuramazda in extant inscriptions, one may be tempted to regard him as the first Zoroastrian ruler of the Persian Empire.[§] However, Darius never claims this honor for himself; instead, he emphasizes the continuities between himself and Cambyses II and Cyrus. In the Bisutun Inscription, he explains his attainment of power by stating that neither he nor his "family" were followers of the Lie (throughout the inscription, Darius includes Cyrus and Cambyses as members of his family).⁴⁵ The archaeological evidence supports the notion that these kings shared similar religious beliefs. The fire-altar that Cyrus built at his capital of Pasargadae very clearly resembles the one depicted on the tomb facades of Darius and his successors at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis. These altars were set in the open rather than in temples, and this is consistent with early Zoroastrian practice, which shunned temple-based cults. Furthermore, the Pasargadae fire-altar contains an unusually deep bowl, which was used to hold twigs and other materials to feed the flames. Within Iran, altars of this kind are known only within a Zoroastrian context, thus indicating that the Pasargadae fire-altar served to house a permanent, ever-burning flame in accordance with standard Zoroastrian ritual.⁴⁶



Tomb relief from Naqsh-e Rostam showing an Achaemenid king, with bow in hand, praying before an outdoor fire-altar, similar to the one that Cyrus built at Pasargadae. The moon is apparent in the upper right corner. The winged solar disc is the symbol of Ahuramazda, who emerges from its center to offer the king the ring of power.

Two other factors point to Cyrus having espoused some form of Zoroastrianism. The first concerns the compositions of the biblical prophet known as Second Isaiah, a staunch advocate of Cyrus who prepared several poems heralding the Persian conquest of Babylon. Much in the same manner as the inscriptions of Darius and his successors, Second Isaiah's compositions legitimize Cyrus' receipt of power by invoking God's creation of the earth, sky, man, and prosperity for man. This parallel is more than just coincidence, and as explained later in this book, good reason exists for thinking that Iranian religious traditions shaped Second Isaiah's conception of God. It is therefore significant that the only Iranian deity we know to have monopolized the creation in this manner is the Zoroastrian Ahuramazda. The second factor bespeaking Cyrus' Zoroastrianism is equally

important and has to do with the name that the Persian conqueror gave his eldest daughter: Atossa (Old Persian **Hutausa*, meaning “Well Granting”).⁴⁷ This was the name of Kavi Vishtaspa’s wife, whom Zoroastrian tradition remembered as the prophet’s first major convert.⁴⁸ It was no less religious a name for Zoroastrians than “Mary” is for Christians, and the fact that Cyrus gave his daughter such a decidedly Zoroastrian name indicates that he was familiar with and generally accepting of the Zoroastrian religious tradition.

So although we have no explicit proof of Cyrus’ religious beliefs, enough information exists, in my mind, to create the presumption that he was a Zoroastrian. Now, this does not mean that Cyrus was as stalwart a believer as Darius or Xerxes. As we will soon see, Zoroastrianism was not deeply entrenched within western Iran in the early sixth century BCE, and pagan practices may have been more common among members of Cyrus’ generation. Furthermore, the classical sources unanimously agree that Cyrus had strong Median affiliations, which may have influenced his faith. Darius and Xerxes notably lacked such connections to the Medes, and this, too, seems to have affected their religious outlook. All of this is to say that, while Cyrus probably considered himself to be a Zoroastrian, his religious beliefs may have been more eclectic than those of Darius or Xerxes.

Zoroastrianism among the Early Persian Laity

An interesting question concerns the extent to

which the Zoroastrian beliefs of Cyrus and his Achaemenid successors corresponded to those of the Persian masses. It is conceivable that there existed in sixth century BCE Persia a national cult, practiced by both kings and laity, which included *all* the gods named in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, even those deities belonging to the Elamite pantheon. These texts record, among other things, the disbursement of goods from the royal treasury to cult centers throughout Persia during the reign of Darius I. However, the context in which these disbursements were made is not altogether clear, so the information in the Tablets must be treated cautiously.⁴⁹ That the Tablets mention Ahuramazda's name only sparingly indicates a disconnect between the "popular religion" and that of the royal family.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is not even clear that all the gods referenced in the Tablets belonged to a single pantheon. Recent studies have attempted to demonstrate that the inhabitants of Persia followed a syncretic religion heavily influenced by Elamite traditions.⁵¹ But the traces of this influence are difficult to detect. Elamite religious expressions do not seem to have penetrated the Old Persian language, and the Persepolis archives attest very few personal names combining Elamite theophoric elements (such as "Humban" the name of the chief deity of the Elamite pantheon) with standard Iranian components. This militates against the existence of a strong Elamite influence, much less of a single all-encompassing Elamo-Persian pantheon.

Moreover, in his Bisutun Inscription, Darius hails Ahuramazda as the "God of the Aryans," and then poignantly remarks that his Elamite adversaries were "faithless" because "they did not worship

Ahuramazda.”⁵² Darius’ statements suggest that religious tensions existed between Persians and Elamites, and that any indications of religious syncretism in the Tablets may be illusory. It is plausible to think that the leaders of the Persian aristocracy merely tolerated the cults of Elamite deities as a political expedient to manage the still sizable Elamite population living in the Persian highlands. Perhaps, the Persian aristocrats expected that the Elamites (and, above all else, the offspring of mixed marriages between Persians and Elamites) should adopt the worship of Persian gods, in addition to whatever local deities they venerated, whereas the Persians, as the ruling ethnicity, should be more resistant to foreign cults.⁵³ In the long run, of course, the Persian gods fully displaced the Elamite deities, which had no future in the religious history of Iran, and their recession into oblivion seems linked to the spread of Zoroastrianism under Achaemenid rule.

That a form of Zoroastrianism had already made headway among the Iranian element in the Persian highlands before Cyrus’ time is suggested by several lines of evidence. Of the hundreds of Persian personal names recorded in the Persepolis archives (including also the Treasury Tablets), less than a handful contain theophoric elements of a “Daivic” nature.⁵⁴ The implication is that the ancestors of these Persians had shunned the worship of the Daivas, ostensibly due to Zoroastrian influence. The diminishing strength of the old Indo-Iranian religion may further explain why the archives do not reference state-sanctioned offerings to the cults of deities explicitly castigated as Daivas in the Zoroastrian tradition.⁵⁵ This evidence should not be dismissed lightly, since the Avesta makes clear that,

before the advent of Zoroastrianism, the term “Daiva” lacked pejorative connotations and that gods classified as Daivas were widely worshipped by nobles and commoners alike.⁵⁶ Logic also dictates that the Achaemenids would not have extolled Ahuramazda’s virtues so readily in their inscriptions if only an insignificant minority of the Persian people shared their religious beliefs.⁵⁷

We may conjecture that Zoroastrianism first gained currency among the Persians during the middle decades of the seventh century BCE. As a salvation faith, Zoroastrianism must have appealed to the inhabitants of a country that had been threatened for several generations by the ravages of the steppe nomads, as well as by the equally aggressive Median and Assyrian Empires.⁵⁸ The evidence further suggests that the aristocracy, and not the peasantry, was the first social class to embrace the new religion within Persia. This scenario is especially attractive if one supposes, as some scholars have, that the early Achaemenids had strong ties to eastern Iran.⁵⁹ One probable consequence of this societal aspect of the religion’s growth was that, no matter how ardently they professed their faith, the Persian masses had only a superficial understanding of Zoroastrianism. Later in this chapter, we will discuss the process by which the Magi became the main priests of the religion under Cyrus’ successors. The very fact that the Achaemenid emperors recruited the members of a foreign tribe to fill the ranks of the Zoroastrian priesthood in the Persian homeland implies a dearth of trained priests who could educate the Persian masses during the pre-imperial period.⁶⁰

It is hardly coincidental, then, that Persian

commoners continued to offer sacrifice in the old pagan manner even after their conversion to Zoroastrianism. This we know from Herodotus' account of Persian religious practices in the mid-fifth century BCE. As part of the same account, Herodotus tells of the Persians' worship of the elements, abhorrence of idolatry, aversion to lying, and great respect for rivers. These and other customs described by the Greek historian are consistent not only with the basic precepts of the old Indo-Iranian religion but, as Mary Boyce has gone to great lengths to show, with Zoroastrian practice, as observed even into modern times.⁶¹ "It is the [Persians'] custom," adds Herodotus, "to climb the highest of their mountains and there to perform sacrifice to Zeus; indeed they call the whole circle of the heavens Zeus."⁶² Because Herodotus habitually refers to foreign gods by the names of their Greek equivalents, Zeus here is none other than Ahuramazda. Long accustomed to nature worship, the Persian laity identified the Wise Lord with that most majestic of natural wonders, which encompasses and contains all creation. For the Persians, Ahuramazda was manifest in the sky.⁶³

The Lord of Wide Pastures

There is one important deity whose name, rather tellingly, seems to be absent from the Persepolis archives and, indeed, from all Achaemenid royal inscriptions before the reign of Artaxerxes II. Mithra, the "Lord of Wide Pastures," was one of the oldest and most popular Indo-Iranian gods. His name appears in a peace treaty entered into by the ruler of the

northern Mitanni kingdom in the fourteenth century BCE as well as in the earliest stratum of Vedic texts dating to the second millennium BCE.

Mithra wore many hats. At various times, each and all of the sun, the oath, the melee, and the empire fell under his purview. In his earliest guise, Mithra embodied the notion of “contract.” The sworn word was sacred to Mithra, who mercilessly punished those who broke their oaths. This facet of Mithra constitutes the focus of the *Mihr Yasht*. Perhaps the most important composition of the Young Avesta, the *Mihr Yasht* documents the manner in which a particular Avestan-speaking community incorporated Mithra’s cult into the Zoroastrian pantheon. Scholarly consensus is divided as to when the *Mihr Yasht* was set in its final form. Some experts favor a date as early as the eighth or ninth century BCE, whereas others argue that this did not occur until the fifth century BCE or later.⁶⁴ All scholars agree, however, that the *Mihr Yasht* contains a great deal of pre-Zoroastrian material and provides useful information on the early Iranian cult of Mithra.⁶⁵

In the *Mihr Yasht*, Mithra destroys both the “ruffians” who “lie unto him” and the nations they represent.⁶⁶ Inherent in Mithra’s behavior is the recognition of the oath as the basic bond uniting tribal society. What is startling is the horrific bloodlust with which Mithra goes about his mission. In punishing the wrongdoers, Mithra receives help from the god of war and victory, Verethragna, the “Obstruction-Smashing Strength,” who, in the shape of a wild boar, wreaks death and destruction on Mithra’s opponents:

We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of wide pastures . . . before whom, Verethragna . . . runs opposing the foes in the shape of

a boar, a sharp-toothed he-boar, a sharp-jawed boar, that kills at one stroke, pursuing, wrathful, with [blood dripping from his] face . . . [Verethragna] cuts all the limbs to pieces, and [mashes], together with the earth, the bones, hair, brains, and blood of the men who have lied unto Mithra.⁶⁷

The unrelenting violence with which Mithra, through Verethragna, assaults his enemies represents a clear example of *Aeshma*, or “Wrathful Aggression,” one of the evil qualities denounced in the Gathas.⁶⁸ Did the prophet oppose the cult of Mithra, whose name is conspicuously absent from the Gathic songs?

An important aspect of Mithra’s cult involved the bull sacrifice. The myth that Mithra initiated the cycle of life and death and set the cosmos in motion by sacrificing a supernatural bull appears to have been a central tenet of his worship since the earliest times.⁶⁹ According to some scholars, this tenet passed into Roman Mithraism – the Mithraic religion that spread across Europe and North Africa during the Roman period – from the religion of the Medes and their allies in northwestern Iran. Based on this and other information, it has been surmised that nocturnal bull sacrifices meant to reenact Mithra’s mythical feat figured heavily in the god’s Iranian cult, as did the consumption of the controversial *haoma* drink.⁷⁰ According to some scholars, *haoma* denoted “wine.”⁷¹ Other experts have identified it with an ephedrine-containing plant that grows in Iran and Central Asia and was consumed after being ground into a fine powder and mixed with milk.⁷² Whatever the truth, the Avesta describes *haoma* as healing, invigorating, and intoxicating. It is believed that Mithra’s devotees first guzzled the *haoma* drink and then, lighting the plant’s twigs on fire, chanted “shouts of joy” as the

sacrificial bull was slowly eviscerated in an “unseemly and orgiastic affair.”⁷³ Zoroaster, we have seen, strictly opposed the cruel treatment of sacrificial animals. He was no less averse to ritual intoxication and the “filth of drunkenness.”⁷⁴

The prophet’s vitriols against certain forms of bovine sacrifice and *haoma* consumption, coupled with his complete silence regarding Mithra, have been interpreted to betray a long and at times bitter rivalry between the worshippers of that god and the Zoroastrian Ahuramazda. Vestiges of this rivalry appear to survive in the *Mihr Yasht*. The *Mihr Yasht* begins with the declaration that Ahuramazda created Mithra as equally deserving of sacrifice and prayer as the Wise Lord himself.⁷⁵ This declaration portends to make Mithra subservient to Ahuramazda, but everything that follows renders Ahuramazda superfluous beside his mighty creation. The *Mihr Yasht* addresses Mithra as the “strongest of all gods, the most valiant of all gods, the most energetic of all gods, the swiftest of all gods, the most fiend-smiting of all gods, he, Mithra, the Lord of Wide Pastures.”⁷⁶ Whereas in the Gathas Ahuramazda and Spenta Mainyu champion the cause of Truth, the *Mihr Yasht* ascribes that role to Mithra and two lesser divinities: Rashnu (“the Ordeal”) and Sroasha (“Obedience”).⁷⁷ The *Mihr Yasht* even makes Mithra the divine patron of all three castes within Iranian society – warriors, priests, and farmers or animal husbandmen.⁷⁸ By extension, the empire as a whole falls under Mithra’s purview, and Mithra receives such lofty titles as the “Nation-Lord of All Nations” and the “Glorious Lord of Nations.”⁷⁹ So great is Mithra that, as the *Mihr Yasht* tells it, even Ahuramazda offers Mithra sacrifice!

Mithra's curiously elevated position vis-à-vis Ahuramazda suggests that the authors of the *Mihr Yasht* consciously redefined the relationship between two gods that previously possessed overlapping qualities and enjoyed supreme status in their respective cults.

Corroborating this proposition is each deity's close relationship to the sun. Certain Avestan verses link the sun exclusively to Ahuramazda by describing it as the Wise Lord's eye.⁸⁰ By contrast, the *Mihr Yasht* makes the sun subservient to Mithra, who guides it across the heavens in an ornate golden chariot drawn by four white steeds.⁸¹ The notion of a chariot-riding solar god is typical of Indo-European religions and finds parallels in Indian and Greek mythology, but certain Zoroastrians must have viewed it as a direct infringement upon Ahuramazda's domain.

Indeed, Mithra's cult seems to have contained many doctrines that puritan Zoroastrians would have found offensive. Considering further that the aggrandizement of Mithra's cult was "a long slow process, beginning probably in pre-Zoroastrian times," Mithra's may well have been the main cult that Zoroaster himself had protested.⁸²

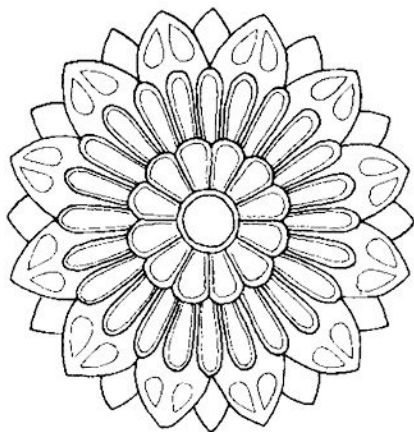
Mithra the Principal Deity of the Medes

That Cyrus venerated Mithra may be deduced from various sources, including Herodotus' story regarding the punishment of the Gyndes River in Babylonia. According to the Greek historian, Cyrus divided this stream into 360 channels as retribution

for the drowning of one of his sacred white horses. The number of channels corresponds to the number of days in the Old Persian calendar and confirms the association of the horses with the sun.⁸³ Cyrus' respect for the Greek god Apollo in Asia Minor has likewise been explained in terms of his dedication to Mithra (with whom the Iranians may have identified Apollo), and the monthly horse sacrifices conducted in Pasargadae at the site of his tomb have been characterized as Mithraic, as has the floral design on the tomb itself.⁸⁴



Fourth century CE relief from Taq-e Bostan showing the god Mithra holding a barsom, or sacred bundle of twigs. The rays around his head signify his function as the sun god. The lotus and sun flower ensemble on which he stands signifies the *Farnah*, or Royal Glory. It is similar but not identical to the floral design carved



Cyrus' reverence of Mithra stands in sharp contrast to Darius' and Xerxes' apparent neglect for the same god. This deserves explanation. It is possible that, unlike Darius, Cyrus had received a form of Zoroastrianism, similar to that described in the *Mihr Yasht*, which honored both Ahuramazda and Mithra. It is also possible that the difference in outlook owed to Cyrus having lived earlier in time. As the personal names mentioned in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets attest, the worship of Mithra was widespread in pre-Zoroastrian western Iran, and members of Cyrus' generation may have been more prone to venerate the deity than Darius and his contemporaries. But one should not deny that Cyrus' and Darius' conflicting attitudes toward Mithra may have stemmed from their different views on the Medes. Cyrus went out of his way to win the support of the Medes during his reign, whereas Darius and Xerxes were determined to stamp out any potential revival of the former Median Empire.⁸⁵

What was the principal religion of the Medes? Written sources on Median religious practices are, of

course, virtually non-existent, so we must rely on broader, more tangential forms of evidence to answer the question. It seems safe to say that Media, like Persia, contained a steadily increasing Zoroastrian population, as many of the Zoroastrian missionaries who reached Persia during the epoch preceding Cyrus must have passed through Media first.⁸⁶ An eighth or ninth century BCE tablet from the royal library of Ashurbanipal appears to list *Assara Mazash*, or Ahuramazda, as a deity worshipped in Media.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the personal names of certain Median chieftains mentioned in the Assyrian sources contain theophoric elements, such as “Ahura,” “Mazda,” and “Arta,” which may indicate a noticeable Zoroastrian influence as early as the eighth century BCE.⁸⁸ However, the concept of *Arta* is known to have predated Zoroaster, and a pagan cult of Ahuramazda is suspected to have preceded him as well; so, in the end, the Assyrian tablets tell us very little about the religion of the Medes other than that its foundations were Iranian.

But other evidence, discussed in detail in Appendix III, points to Mithra as having been the focus of Median cultic activity. Given Mithra’s wide-ranging responsibilities, his prominence among the Medes should not surprise us. It remains unknown, however, whether the Medes of Cyrus’ day venerated the god in the context of a purely esoteric religion similar to the Roman cult, a faith based on the reverence of Time (a concept closely linked to solar worship in the ancient Near East), or even an adulterated form of Zoroastrianism, in which Mithra received undue deference. My own view is that the Roman cult provides the best analogy for the Median

worship of Mithra, but for our purposes here, we might describe all these religions as “Mithraic.”

Foreign Influences on the Median Cult of Mithra

What is interesting is that the Mithraic cult practiced by Astyages and his supporters seems to have been shaped to a considerable extent by foreign religious practices. Living along the Great Khorasan Road, the Medes had constant interchange with the peoples and civilizations of Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, and it is reasonable to assume that this interchange influenced the Median worship of Mithra during the centuries preceding Cyrus’ rise. Such influence has been adduced primarily by scholars attempting to establish connections between ancient Iranian religious beliefs and Roman Mithraism. According to some such scholars, the main source of foreign influence upon the Median worship of Mithra came from the Scythian and Saka tribes that overran the Iranian plateau before the rise of the Median Empire. Other scholars have pleaded for a definitive Mesopotamian influence. In my estimation, both arguments have validity, although they must be used with caution.

That the influx of Scythian and Saka tribes during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE enhanced Mithra’s popularity within Media is entirely possible, as these nomads are known to have held Mithra in the highest regard.⁸⁹ Herodotus tells of the Massagetae, the main constituent within the Saka Tigrakhauda, the principal nomadic horde to overrun Media: “The only

god they worship is the sun, and to him they offer the horse in sacrifice, under the notion of giving to the swiftest of the gods the swiftest of all mortal creatures.”⁹⁰ The impact that the nomadic occupation had on the Median cult of Mithra may be gleaned through analogy to the situation described in the Indian *Puranas*, which mention the introduction of a cult of Mithra as sun god, free of Zoroastrian influence, in northwestern India following the migration of Saka tribes to that region in the first century BCE.⁹¹ The religious influence exerted by the Sakas in northwestern Iran seems to have contributed to a seemingly slight, yet important, change in Mithra’s cult. Whereas the early Iranian Mithra was primarily a god of contract closely associated with but not quite identical to the sun, the Median Mithra became synonymous with the great heavenly body.⁹²

Further contributing to this development, we may surmise, was the syncretic identification of the Median Mithra with two important Mesopotamian solar deities. One was Shamash, the Babylonian sun god whom the Assyrians also venerated. The other, some scholars have argued, was Nergal, a deity of northern Mesopotamian origin who presided over the sinister phases of the sun and the kingdom of the dead. ¶ A god of fire, war, hunting, and pestilence, Nergal had as his avatars the lion, dog, snake, raven, and scorpion; accordingly it has been argued that these animals became important Mithraic symbols due to the influence of this god.⁹³ Such theories are tantalizing but must be tempered by the fact that certain animal icons were widely distributed and interpreted in more or less the same manner throughout the ancient world. Although the precise

manner in which Nergal was incorporated into the Median pantheon remains uncertain, his integration seems to have resulted in a renewed emphasis upon morbid rites, including the propitiation of evil spirits and, perhaps, the practice of human sacrifice, which hearkened back to the earliest days of Iranian paganism. These rituals have been linked to the cult-epithet *Khshathrapati*. First attested as a Mithraic title in the eighth century BCE Indian *Brahmanas*, this epithet originally meant “Lord of Power” but later, as a result of Iranian political unification, seems to have acquired the definition “Lord of the Empire.” *Khshathrapati* may have been the title under which the Medes venerated Mithra as the chief god of their state.⁹⁴

Finally, there are grounds for supposing that Mesopotamian or Urartian influence led the Medes to worship Mithra within temples.** Temple-based rites were not a feature of early Zoroastrianism or the old Indo-Iranian religion, although in later Zoroastrianism they came to be associated with Mithra, who by then had been incorporated into the Good Religion. It therefore seems plausible to venture that the central temple at Tepe Nush-e Jan was an early Mithraic sanctuary. In that case, the building would represent the earliest known example of an indoor **mithradana*, or “place of Mithra,” which became the standard term for a pagan temple in Armenia, a land with close political and religious ties to Media.

The Religious Aspects of the Persian Rebellion and Its Consequences in Iran

Owing to its accretion of foreign elements, the Median state cult practiced by Astyages must have seemed repugnant to both Zoroastrians and adherents of the old Indo-Iranian religion, which despite its pagan nature demanded strict conformity with traditional rituals. Whether Astyages sought to force his own brand of Mithraism upon his non-Median subjects is unclear. We have no evidence regarding Persia, but the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene accuses Astyages of having propagated the worship of serpents, and the memory of a sinister underworld deity known as *Shahapet* (*Khshathrapati*) persisted in Armenia centuries after the birth of Christ.⁹⁵ It is tempting to interpret this evidence to show that Astyages imposed a form of Mithra-worship, influenced by the cult of Nergal, upon his Armenian subjects. However, Moses' anecdote may constitute mere legendary embellishment, while the sinister portrayal of *Khshathrapati* in Christian Armenia could reflect the usual derogation of a pagan divinity introduced by Median settlers who had intermarried with the local population.

Still, one cannot doubt that the diverse religious climate within Media (and across western Iran in general) in the sixth century BCE could have produced tensions between competing cults that a shrewd leader might attempt to exploit. Given the circumstances, Cyrus would hardly have hesitated to use religious rhetoric to rally support for himself during the Persian uprising (553–550 BCE).[†] The use of such propaganda is a recurring theme in Iranian history, though it often represents nothing more than baseless rhetoric. But, the evidence of Tepe Nush-e Jan indicates that

theological issues were actually in dispute during the sixth century BCE, and Cyrus' Zoroastrian leanings may well have inculcated him with genuine disdain for certain features of the Median state cult, including any morbid rites aimed at propitiating evil spirits. He may have been speaking in earnest, then, if he urged the Persians (or a substantial group of them) to fight for God during the war against the Medes.⁹⁶ But the Achaemenid had to be careful. Because his bid for the Median throne depended upon the collaboration of certain groups within the Median aristocracy, the Persian conqueror had to temper his use of Zoroastrian propaganda. This was so, even though some noble Medes were probably Zoroastrians and could be counted on to support Cyrus on the basis of shared religious beliefs.⁹⁷ Moreover, Cyrus had spent much of his youth in Media and, as such, may have had a soft spot in his heart for Mithra. So his rhetoric had to be nuanced. Within Persia, he could portray himself as a Zoroastrian crusader, but among the majority of Medes, he had to be a Mithraic hero.

The founder legends transmitted by Herodotus and Ctesias may be interpreted to illustrate the intricacies of the religious propaganda employed by Cyrus during the Persian-Median war. The critical figure in each tale is the humble pastoralist who raises Cyrus in his youth. In Herodotus' "Median" legend, the pastoralist is named Mitradates, whose name means "Created by Mithra." In Ctesias' fundamentally "Persian" legend the pastoralist receives the more Zoroastrian name of Atradates, or "Created by Fire."⁹⁸ It is important to note that these legends originated with specific goals in mind. Herodotus himself relates that Cambyses I and Mandane had spread a story

about how a wild dog had suckled Cyrus after his abandonment in the wild “in order that their son might be thought by the Persians to have been preserved in a more supernatural manner.”⁹⁹ Based on this anecdote, the legends recounted by Herodotus and Ctesias would seem to reflect the types of stories that circulated in Media and Persia, respectively, to garner support for Cyrus.¹⁰⁰ That each tale would have been modified to account for the religious beliefs of its intended audience attests to the Persian king’s political savvy.

This brings us to Harpagus. If the Persian rebellion doubled as a holy war, what incentive did this Median nobleman have to betray his king? The thinking here is that, to the extent religion factored into Harpagus’ decision, his treason stemmed from the bastardized nature of the Median state cult. Much has been written about Harpagus’ religious beliefs. However, he seems to have been a worshipper of Mithra; not only did Herodotus likely hear the Mithraic legend of Cyrus’ origins from Harpagus’ descendants, but the so-called Letoon Inscription indicates that the Medes who followed him to Asia Minor between 545 BCE and 540 BCE established a local cult of Mithra *Khshathrapati* in Xanthus.¹⁰¹ Nor is it likely that Harpagus was a Zoroastrian who had adopted the worship of Mithra, for the Letoon Inscription suggests that the Mithraic priests who accompanied him to Lycia called themselves *karapans*, the same title used in the Gathas to denote the cult-chiefs of the old Indo-Iranian religion.¹⁰² Because the *karapans* were distinct from the Magi, whom Astyages had designated as the priests of the Median state cult, we may surmise that Harpagus worshipped Mithra in

the old Indo-Iranian fashion, and not in accordance with the syncretic cult promoted by Astyages.[‡] This may have contributed to his fallout with the Median king and endorsement of Cyrus as a worthy candidate to the Median throne.

Herodotus' account of Cyrus' origins and rise to power would seem to support this notion. As noted by several scholars, this narrative bears a curious resemblance to later forms of the Azhi Dahaka legend.[§] That this resemblance is no coincidence is evident from the sources quoted by the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene. According to one such source, the second century CE Syrian writer Mar Apas Catina, whose acquaintances in Armenia included claimed descendants of Astyages, the Azhi Dahaka of the Persian epics was none other than the last king of the Medes.¹⁰³ This association is revealing, for, aside from representing foreign oppression, Azhi Dahaka was the embodiment of religious perversion in the Iranian epic tradition. Earlier in this book, we touched upon the legendary evolution of Azhi Dahaka from a three-headed dragon to a human or anthropomorphic king. In the *Shahnameh*, Azhi Dahaka (Zahhak) is described as having two snakes growing from his shoulders. No one knows the inspiration for this new appearance or when he attained it. But it is of interest that, some scholars have traced it to the iconography of Shamash and Nergal. On the famous Hammurabi stela, Shamash appears with multiple snakes, or flames, emanating from his shoulders, and a Parthian period sculpture from Hatra in northern Mesopotamia depicts Nergal as a bearded man with a serpent on each shoulder.¹⁰⁴ Also of significance is the villain's epithet, Bivarasp, which Ferdowsi correctly defines as

the “Master of a Myriad Horses.”¹⁰⁵ This title befits neither Shamash nor Nergal, but is most becoming of Mithra, for whom the plentiful herds of Nisaya were sacred.¹⁰⁶ It also recalls Ctesias’ statement that Astyages went by the pseudonym Aspandas, meaning “Possessor of Horses.”¹⁰⁷





Snake-shouldered gods and demons: Zahhak (*top left*) from a sixteenth-century Safavid miniature painting; Shamash (*top right*), with snakes or flames rising from his shoulders, as depicted on the Hammurabi stela; Nergal (*lower left*), accompanied by snakes, scorpions, and three dogs, on a carving from Hatra; and Angra Mainyu (*lower right*), shown in profile, with a snake rising from his left shoulder and encircling his head, being trampled by Ahuramazda's horse from a bas-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam.

We thus have grounds for supposing that, during the Persian revolt, Cyrus' supporters opposed the Mithraic cult promoted by Astyages. Furthermore, judging from the ruins of Tepe Nush-e Jan, it would

seem that Cyrus, true to his propaganda, proscribed this cult upon defeating his grandfather. Assuming the closure of Nush-e Jan's central temple to have been Cyrus' work, we may say something about the tact with which the Persian king launched his religious reforms. As noted by John Curtis, the project of immuring the temple "must have been enormously expensive and would have required considerable planning."¹⁰⁸ The implication is that the temple was treated with respect, even though its use was no longer permitted.

Even if Cyrus had no hand in the temple's closure, various factors suggest that Achaemenid rule forced the adherents of the former Median state religion and, perhaps, other hostile non-Zoroastrian cults to abandon their beliefs or to escape to the wild parts of Iran or even to the peripheries of the Persian Empire. There, they could assimilate their abjured deities with local gods to avail themselves of the protection that the Achaemenid kings generally extended to foreign cults.¹⁰⁹ This religiously motivated exodus would seem to have reached its peak under Darius and Xerxes, when tensions between the Zoroastrians and their enemies boiled over. But one should think that the process of emigration had already begun under Cyrus.

Cyrus' defeat of Astyages thus initiated a process, whereby Ahuramazda became the pre-eminent god in western Iran. Mithra was not neglected, however, and continued to be worshipped by the Medes and their allies, albeit in ways compatible with the Zoroastrian faith of the Achaemenid kings and the old Indo-Iranian religion. Indeed, we may surmise that Cyrus laid the groundwork for a state religion in which Ahuramazda reigned supreme and Mithra held an

important, yet subservient, role. If so, the Persian conqueror may have arrived at the same compromise reached by the authors of the *Mihr Yasht*, as well as by the later Achaemenids, under whom the worship of Mithra was definitively reconciled with that of Ahuramazda.[¶]

Cyrus and the Magi

The same spirit of compromise may have inspired Cyrus to reaffirm the authority of the Median priesthood. Its members were the Magi (Old Persian *Magu*), who were recruited from the tribe of the same name and, if we may trust Herodotus, enjoyed high standing in Astyages' court. The Magi's role in Median society paralleled that of the Hebrew Levites in ancient Israel.¹¹⁰ According to the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, the Magi resided near the Median district of Nisaya (in present-day Kermanshah).¹¹¹ But Herodotus seems to have placed them in Azerbaijan (where there is a plain called Moghan, which was possibly named after the Magi).¹¹² As with other Iranian tribes, the Magi may have been widely dispersed.

How the Magi came to occupy the western reaches of the Iranian plateau is a mystery. Some scholars have adopted the view that the Magi were an indigenous non-Indo-European tribe that eventually became "Medized"; others have argued that they were of eastern Iranian or Saka provenance and that they settled in the northwestern corner of the Iranian plateau during the great nomadic migrations of the

eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Supporting the latter view is the apparent prevalence among various Central Asian peoples of the curious purity rites and marital customs practiced by the Magi; but the sources attesting their prevalence all postdate the expansion of Persian political power, so we cannot be sure whether these customs were truly indigenous to Central Asia or whether the inhabitants of this region adopted them after the Magi became the chief priests of the Achaemenid Empire.¹¹³

According to Herodotus, the Magi practiced different burial rites than other Medes and Persians, who typically interred their dead after first covering the body with wax.¹¹⁴ By contrast, the Magi exposed their corpses to be eaten by vultures and dogs. This grotesque funerary custom arose from the belief that contaminating the earth or other natural media with rotting flesh was a grave sin; the Magi therefore only interred the bones of their dead after wild animals had removed all the meat.¹¹⁵ The Magian obsession with ritualistic purity also carried over to the treatment of animals. In *The Histories*, Herodotus relates that, unlike the Egyptian priests who kill no living creature except for sacrifice, “the Magi not only kill anything, except dogs and men, with their bare hands but make a special point of doing so; ants, snakes, animals, birds – no matter what, they kill them indiscriminately.”¹¹⁶ The passage oversimplifies things, inasmuch as the Magi classified a much broader range of animals as benign and, therefore, deserving of kind treatment. In addition to their purity rites, the Magi were notorious for conducting incestuous marriages. Xanthus of Lydia was the first western historian to report on this matter; his more famous contemporary,

Herodotus, noted that the Persians did not practice close-kin marriages before the reign of Cambyses II.¹¹⁷

These customs call into question the Magi's religious beliefs. Opinions differ, but most scholars accept that the original Magian religion featured a primitive form of dualism based on the worship of the elements.¹¹⁸ The performance of elaborate rituals aimed at warding off various evil spirits – typically associated with things, such as putrefaction, death, and disease – also figured heavily in their creed; the Magi's ability to perform such rituals in return for compensation presumably made them an indispensable element within Median society.¹¹⁹ The Magi were famous throughout antiquity for their alleged prowess at communicating with the spirit world. They believed the world to be “full of phantoms,” and some of their number even claimed the ability to detach their souls from their bodies in order to catch a glimpse of the afterworld.¹²⁰ The Magi's status as a relatively reclusive group – Herodotus never seems to have spoken to one – must have enhanced their reputation in this regard. But the Magi also possessed a genuine craving for knowledge, and the Greek philosophers counted them among the learned men of the East. As the Iranian equivalents of the priest-scholars of Babylonia and Egypt, the Magi were important attendants of the Median kings, who apparently consulted them on all major matters and entrusted secular offices to them, as well.¹²¹

The Magi's desire for learning and stalwart determination to preserve their social standing led to a certain openness to foreign religious influence. Magian priests in the service of Cyaxares and Astyages presumably presided over the incorporation of

Babylonian and Saka religious concepts into the Median state cult. But other members of the tribe appear to have adopted different religious ideas. The Greek historians refer to certain Magi who believed in reincarnation (ostensibly as a result of Indian religious influence).¹²² And one might fancy that, even in the pre-Achaemenid period, a number of Magi recognized the opportunity to merge their own primitive dualism with the more lofty theology of the Zoroastrians.

Whatever the case, Cyrus and his Achaemenid successors put great stock in having the Magi master the Zoroastrian religious tradition. They made this a priority, because, as recent converts to Zoroastrianism, the Persian masses had only a cursory understanding of the eastern faith, which had originated far away from their settlements. To receive proper instruction, the Persians needed religious experts who could tap into the Zoroastrian communities of eastern Iran, where the priests who represented the “living books” of the faith resided. Such action was necessary, for the Avesta had not yet been committed to writing, and the sacred literature remained largely unconsolidated, with different texts current in different parts of eastern Iran.¹²³ The Magi’s great achievement was to consult with the eastern priests, in order to memorize these texts and explain their meaning to the western Iranians. This was no easy task. Not only were the Avestan languages difficult to comprehend, but the amount of material that had to be memorized was enormous. Yet the Magi accomplished their mission, and their success proved instrumental to the spread of Zoroastrianism in western Iran.¹²⁴

Xenophon’s claim that Cyrus established the Magian priesthood may well represent an authentic

historical tradition concerning the Persian conqueror's patronage of those Magi who had either already accepted or were willing to adopt Zoroastrianism as their religion.¹²⁵ Indeed, we may suppose that Cyrus ordered this small sect of Magi to seek religious knowledge from the Zoroastrian priests of eastern Iran in exchange for royal protection against persecution from their puritanical kinsmen. The tales concerning the conflicts between Darius and the non-Zoroastrian Magi indicate that there may have been resistance even during Cyrus' reign.¹²⁶

In any event, it took many years for the Magi to adopt the Zoroastrian tradition and entrench themselves in Persian society. The scribes who drafted the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which date to the turn of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, distinguished between the Magi and the general priesthood of Persia (the Old Iranian name of this priesthood is unknown – the Tablets employ only the Elamite term *shatin*); these texts further suggest that the majority of Magi had not yet adopted the worship of Ahuramazda.¹²⁷ By the mid-fifth century BCE, however, many Magi had converted to Zoroastrianism, and they enjoyed a monopoly over priestly affairs among the Persians, who never sacrificed without a Magian present.¹²⁸

By wedding their interests to those of the Achaemenid kings, the Magi became the principal guardians and priests of the Zoroastrian religion.** The grandiose theology of the Pahlavi religious texts is largely the product of Magian thought. In developing this theology, the Magi combined Zoroastrian religious doctrines with Mesopotamian concepts of time and history to develop the robust millenary schemes that became one of Zoroastrianism's defining features.

These schemes furthered the Persian kings' sense of purpose, arising from the conviction that their rule would facilitate the salvation of the world at the end of time, an event that the prophet himself seemed to have believed was imminent.[†] The Magi's obsession with ritual purity finds reflection in the bizarre *Videvdāta*. This grammatically flawed Young Avestan text focuses upon the onerous steps necessary to purify oneself after contact with dead matter and prescribes the same rite of funerary exposure described by Herodotus.¹²⁹ As a result, many scholars suspect that the Magi either authored the *Videvdāta* themselves or influenced the Zoroastrian group responsible for its composition. However, the *Videvdāta* never mentions the Magi.¹³⁰ So one might attribute the text to an eastern Iranian group with similar beliefs that had squared its ancestral customs with Zoroastrianism in a manner satisfactory to the Magi. What is clear is that the Magi propagated the *Videvdāta* and made it an integral part of the Avesta.

Another custom referenced in the *Videvdāta* that the Magi and certain eastern Iranians are known to have espoused concerns the abhorrence of “unholy” creatures. The *Videvdāta* justifies the practice by declaring that Angra Mainyu created various animals to contaminate Ahuramazda's good creations. Rather interestingly, Pahlavi religious writings that are clearly the work of the Zoroastrian Magi classify as “devilish” many creatures deemed sacred to Mithra, including lions, ravens, scorpions, and snakes. Magian influence also resulted in next-of-kin marriages becoming a religious duty for Zoroastrians, and both the *Videvdāta* and Pahlavi texts mention this custom, too.¹³¹

Some scholars have characterized the infusion of “Magian” concepts within Zoroastrianism as a great perversion of a pristine faith.¹³² However, it is important to remember that Magian influence did not detract from the central tenets of the religion, which continued to focus upon the conflict between good and evil, Ahuramazda’s creation of the cosmos, and the belief in a final judgment and afterlife.

During the fifth century BCE, the Zoroastrian Magi were in competition with priestly groups from eastern Iran for recognition as the main authorities on the prophet’s teachings.¹³³ It was to support their claims in this regard that the Magi revised history to make the prophet one of their own. Thus, Xanthus of Lydia and subsequent Greek authors recognized Zoroaster as a Magian.

The Magi’s historical manipulations had the surprising effect over time of helping to erase Cyrus’ name from Iranian memory. During the early centuries of the Christian era, the Magi attempted to solidify their reputation as Zoroastrianism’s original priests by further reconstructing the history of the religion to transfer the setting of events recounted in the Avesta from eastern Iran to the west. So thorough was this effort that the Magi even renamed certain western Iranian locales after places mentioned in the Avesta; thus spawned the faulty tradition, accepted as true for many centuries, that the Aryan Abode was located in Azerbaijan and that Zoroaster was a native of that land. As part of the same ploy, the Magi assimilated the heroes and political leaders of the Avesta to the great kings of Media and Persia. So it passed that Cyrus, whose defeat of Astyages marked a great victory for Zoroastrianism, lost his identity, in

part, to Kavi Vishtaspa, the first great patron of the faith. ‡ The identification of the Persian conqueror with the eastern Iranian kavi seemed all the more legitimate to the later Magi, because Cyrus had lived contemporaneously with another prominent Vishtaspa: the Achaemenid Hystaspes, father of Darius I. Because in Iran the son normally inherits the father's estate, the impression given through the haze of time was that Cyrus had sired Darius and ruled under the throne-name Vishtaspa.¹³⁴ The early Islamic authors consequently attributed to Kavi Vishtaspa some of Cyrus' notable deeds. According to Ibn Balkhi, Kavi Vishtaspa founded the institution of Iranian monarchy, and Tabari provides that he freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity.¹³⁵

But the continued memory of Cyrus' actions hardly compensates for the "complete oblivion" into which the Persian founder's name was cast, both in the Zoroastrian tradition and in Iranian history as a whole (for the Zoroastrian tradition formed the basis of the epics through which the Iranians remembered their ancient history in late antiquity and medieval times).¹³⁶ This development is all the more ironic, because Cyrus' conquest of Media marked a significant turning point in the religious history of the world. In another chapter, we will discuss Zoroastrianism's likely influence on Judaism. This influence, which contributed to the development of many doctrines that later formed the core of Christian theology, would never have occurred without the royal endorsement of Zoroastrianism by Cyrus and his Achaemenid successors.

‡ Certain scholars, especially those seeking to emphasize the similarities between Zoroastrianism and Christianity, have

attempted to portray Zoroaster as a monotheist. However, it makes the most sense to characterize his religion as a “henotheism,” the term used by Max Müller to denote faiths that center on one supreme deity while accepting the existence of other gods. Pre-Exilic Judaism, for example, was, in all likelihood, henotheistic.

‡ Zoroaster’s pastoral roots may be gleaned, in part, from his own name, as well as those of his parents. Thus, the name “Zoroaster” (Avestan *Zarathushtra*) has been derived to mean “Having Golden Camels.” Zoroaster’s father was Pourushaspa, whose name has been explained as “Having Many Horses” or “Having Gray Horses,” and his mother was named Dughdhova, “Who Has Milked White Cows.” However, the name of Zoroaster’s clan, “Spitama,” meaning either the “White” or “With Abundant Force,” is not suggestive of a pastoral background. For the etymologies of these names, see Olmstead (1948), 94; Tavernier (2007), 314.

§ The inscriptions carved in the names of Arsames and Ariaramnes both mention Ahuramazda. However, the authenticity of these texts is in question.

¶ These sinister phases included the mid-day sun – deemed lethal in desert climates – and the sun at night. Regarding the latter, the Mesopotamians believed that, during the night, the sun passed beneath the earth, through the netherworld inhabited by the souls of the dead; Nergal’s function as a death god ostensibly arose from this belief.

** See page 468.

† For Cyrus’ use of religious propaganda in other contexts, see pages 102, 241–243, and Appendix XI.

‡ It should be remembered that the title *Khshathrapati* predated the establishment of the Median Empire as a cult-epithet for Mithra, so the title does not automatically imply adherence to the foreign-influenced cult endorsed by Astyages (see page 146).

§ See Appendix XVIII.

¶ See pages 409–410, and Appendix III.

** This development resulted in a major change in Zoroastrian priestly terminology. As known in the Avesta, the original priests of the Good Religion went by the titles *athravan* and *zoatar*. Yet, as a result of the Magian usurpation, the Arsacids and Sasanids generically referred to all Zoroastrian priests as *moghs* (“Magi”) or *mobeds* (“Chief-Magi,” from Old Persian **magu-pati*), and the Moslems called all Zoroastrians *Majusiyya* (“followers of the Magi”).

† See Appendix XX.

‡ Cyrus’ identification with Kavi Vishtaspa is discussed in greater detail in Appendix XVIII.

In the Paths of Heroes: The Conquest of Eastern Iran

We sacrifice unto Mithra, the Lord of Wide Pastures . . . who first of the heavenly gods reaches over Mount Hara, before the undying, swift-horsed sun, and foremost in a golden array takes hold of the beautiful summits and from thence looks over the abodes of the Aryans with a beneficent eye, where the valiant chiefs draw up their many troops in array, where the high mountains, rich in pastures and waters, yield plenty to the cattle, where the deep lakes, with salt waters, stand, where wide-flowing rivers swell and hurry toward Ishkata and Pouruta, Margiana and Areia, Sogdian Gava, and Chorasmia.

—Avestan Hymn to Mithra

Writing in the third century BCE, the Greek geographer Eratosthenes described a vast country called *Ariana*, which extended from the Indus River in the east to Persia and Media in the west and which was inhabited by culturally related nations and tribes.¹ Two centuries earlier, Hellanicus of Lesbos had

recorded that Persia and Media once comprised part of the *Aria* land.² The same tradition apparently inspired Herodotus' statement that the Medes went by the name *Arioi* during an earlier epoch.³ These are the first western references to a greater Iranian nation. Already evident in the Avesta, this notion developed into a powerful ideology under the Sasanids, who referred to their empire as *Eranshahr* (the "Empire of the Aryans/Iranians"). The Sasanids made it a primary political objective to foster a common national identity among their different Iranian subjects. Did the Achaemenids do so as well?

This question has spawned much debate in recent years. According to some scholars, the ancient term *Ariya* ("Aryan," "Iranian") possessed a primarily religious or non-political ethnic connotation during the Achaemenid period.⁴ The proponents of this theory conclude that the idea of Iran as a political entity never existed under the Achaemenids. However, the late Ali Reza Shahbazi has convincingly debunked this notion in an important article published in 2005.⁵ Drawing upon a vast corpus of linguistic and textual data, Shahbazi has shown that the term *Ariya* was of special political significance for the Achaemenids and their Iranian subjects. Pride in belonging to a specific supranational group was what motivated Darius I and Xerxes I to declare in their inscriptions that they were not just Persians but "Aryans" of "Aryan lineage."⁶ These kings generally tolerated foreign religions but actively suppressed Daiva-worship and other aberrant cults within Iran to unite their Iranian subjects in the veneration of Ahuramazda, the "God of the Aryans."⁷ Furthermore, throughout the Achaemenid period, the kings trusted their Iranian, as opposed to non-Iranian,

subjects to make the gravest sacrifices for the welfare of the empire. Royal armies and military colonies were thus composed primarily of Iranian troops, not just Persians and Medes but also Hyrcanians, Chorasmians, and Sakas.⁸ As the histories of Alexander the Great make clear, these and other Iranian peoples viewed themselves as having the greatest stake in the survival of the Achaemenid Empire. Indeed, the stiffest resistance to the Macedonian conquest of Iran came not from the Medes and Persians, but from the eastern Iranians, who rallied around the Achaemenid banner when all others had deserted.

Cyrus' eastern conquests thus deserve special attention, for they brought all the sedentary peoples of Iran under a single rule for the first time in history and re-established the old ties that had perished during the great Aryan migration, when each tribe had gone off in search of a kingdom and glory of its own. That said, very little is known about these campaigns. This dearth of knowledge results, in part, from the tendency of the classical authors to chronicle only those events that transpired in the west of the Persian Empire and were of interest to the Greeks. So in reconstructing Cyrus' eastern campaigns we must rely more than ever upon fragmentary and anecdotal evidence.

Chronology of Conquests and the Political Landscape of Pre-Achaemenid Eastern Iran and Central Asia

The first issue we face pertains to chronology. Ctesias claims that, soon after conquering Media in

550 BCE, Cyrus invaded Bactria and the land of the Sakas.⁹ It makes sense that the Persian conqueror would have looked to secure the northeastern flank of the Iranian plateau, which has always been vulnerable to large-scale invasions, before taking his armies westward against the hostile kingdoms of Lydia and Babylonia. However, a deep foray into Central Asia would have precluded Cyrus from entering northern Mesopotamia in early 547 BCE, as recorded in the Babylonian Chronicle.¹⁰ It is perhaps best, then, to interpret Ctesias' reference as relating to a brief excursion into the westernmost reaches of Bactrian territory. In this connection, the Bisutun Inscription considers Margiana, the land surrounding the Marv oasis in modern Turkmenistan, as a Bactrian dependency.¹¹ Cyrus presumably battled the Bactrians there or even farther to the west.¹²

Although this expedition likely represented the extent of Cyrus' activity in the east before his attack on Lydia, the Persian conqueror must have returned to the area shortly after conquering Croesus' kingdom. Working from Babylonian records, Berossus remarks that Cyrus had already subjugated "the rest of Asia" when he descended upon Babylonia in 539 BCE.¹³ Herodotus makes a similar comment, and many scholars rely upon these statements to conclude that Cyrus completed all his eastern conquests between 544 BCE and 540 BCE.¹⁴ This seems plausible, for Babylonian business documents from 535–534 BCE mention a Chorasmian named Datafarnah, who likely served in the Persian army that occupied Babylonia several years earlier.¹⁵ The possibility remains, however, that certain territories were annexed to the empire only after Babylonia's fall. §

From the Bisutun Inscription, we know that Cyrus seized the following lands in eastern Iran and Central Asia: Drangiana, Areia, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandara, the land of the Sakas, Sattagydia, Arachosia, and Makran. These lands covered much the same territory as the modern nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and also included parts of Kazakhstan. Regarding the number of campaigns needed to subdue this vast region, the *Cyropaedia* provides that Cyrus died after returning to Persia for the seventh time in his reign.¹⁶ Deducting from this benchmark figure Cyrus' expeditions against the Medes, Lydians, and Babylonians leaves room for four campaigns into the east. This number drops to two if we account for Cyrus' fatal march against the Massagetae and his mop-up operations against Astyages' supporters after the conquest of Ecbatana. Other sources support a similar figure, as do logistical considerations. The annual campaigns of the Assyrian kings often lasted six months. However, "such marches to and fro rarely exceeded some five or six hundred miles, whereas Cyrus had to undertake the moving of armies up to five times that distance."¹⁷ Thus, assuming Cyrus had completed all his conquests before advancing against Babylonia, the Persian conqueror could only have ventured two campaigns – separated by the briefest of respites – into the east during the five-year period between 544 BCE and 540 BCE.

One campaign must have been directed against the northeastern Iranians and steppe nomads, whereas the other targeted the lands to the south of the Hindu Kush Mountains. This towering range, which extends from central Afghanistan toward the even loftier

Himalayas, represents the great dividing line in the geography of the eastern lands. The territories to the north and west of the Hindu Kush have historically maintained strong political and cultural ties to the inhabitants of the Central Asian steppe, whereas those to the south and east have had closer affiliations with the Indian subcontinent.

What was the political landscape of eastern Iran on the eve of the Persian conquest? The eastern frontier of the Median Empire remains largely unknown, so we cannot tell which territories passed to Cyrus with his triumph over Astyages. Arrian speaks of Median domination as far afield as India, but because he makes the Medes the successors of the Assyrians in this regard, his testimony is worthless.¹⁸ On the whole, there is little evidence to suggest that the Medes exercised meaningful political control beyond Parthia and Hyrcania.

Important references to pre-Achaemenid, eastern Iranian political formations exist in the Greek and Zoroastrian sources.¹⁹ Classical authors, including Herodotus, Ctesias, and Xenophon, seem to have heard of an early Bactrian state, contemporary and on par with the Median and Assyrian Empires. This is certainly possible given the land's size, topography, and location along important and well-traveled trade routes leading to the Iranian plateau, Central Asia, and India.²⁰ The rulers of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, which arose in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests, successfully exploited these conditions to transform Bactria into what Strabo called the "ornament of all *Ariana*," a prosperous center of agriculture and trade with considerable political influence over the inhabitants of Transoxiana and the Central Asian

steppe as far as China.²¹ The extent to which Strabo's description applies to earlier epochs is unclear, but Ctesias, who lived during the fourth century BCE, paints a very similar picture of pre-Achaemenid Bactria in his account of the wars waged by the fictional Assyrian king Ninus.²² Ctesias describes Bactria as a wealthy kingdom, possessing many towns and cities with treasuries overflowing with gold. The lord of this kingdom, who may have been a close ally of the Medes, had his seat along a tributary of the Oxus River in the great city of Bactra (modern Balkh). Ctesias emphasizes the strong fortifications of this settlement, which the Avesta calls "beautiful *Bakhdhi* of uplifted banners."²³ Later historians refer to Bactra as Zariaspa, the "Golden Horse," a tribal name according to Ptolemy.²⁴ Seemingly confirmed by the discovery near the Oxus of a votive plaque bearing the graven image of a stallion, this alternate designation hints at the emblem that once graced Bactra's raised banners.

In addition to the Bactrians, Cyrus may have faced a fairly powerful political formation with origins in the Oxus lowlands. The earliest classical reference to this polity occurs in fragments of Hecataeus' lost geography. This work presumably formed the basis of the following controversial passage composed by Herodotus:

There is a plain in Asia which is shut in on all sides by a mountain range, and in this mountain range are five openings. The plain lies on the confines of the Chorasmians, Hyrcanians, Parthians, Sarangians [**Drangians**], and Thamanaeans, and belonged formerly to the first-mentioned of those peoples. Ever since the Persians, however, obtained the mastery of Asia, it has been the property of the Great King. A mighty river, called the Aces, flows from the hills

enclosing the plain; and this stream, formerly splitting into five channels, ran through the five openings in the hills, and watered the lands of the five nations which dwell around. The Persian came, however, and conquered the region²⁵

The reference here to Chorasmian hegemony is explicit, so the question becomes what modern territory should be identified with Herodotus' plain? Sources from the time of Alexander onward locate Chorasmia within the region of the lower Oxus, wherefore some scholars have equated the Aces River valley with the oasis of Khiva, the capital of medieval Khwarazm.²⁶ To be sure, the name "Khiva" has been traced to earlier forms – *Khivaq* or *Khayvak* in the Islamic sources – which resemble Herodotus' "Aces."²⁷ But Iranian geography is replete with recurring toponyms – a product of frequent tribal migrations – and Khiva is too far to the north to have been spoken of as adjacent to Drangiana (modern Sistan). For this reason, certain scholars have identified the Aces River with the Hari Rud (or its extension, the Tezhend) in western Afghanistan.²⁸ Alexander's chroniclers called this river, or a lengthy segment of it, the Areius and the surrounding country Areia (Old Persian *Haraiva*, modern Herat). However, they also transmitted the local name of the lower Hari Rud as the Ochus (Old Persian *Vahauka*), which could be alternatively rendered as "Aces" in Greek.²⁹ The thinking here is that Herodotus may have combined information regarding two similarly named eastern Iranian streams, each associated with the Chorasmians.³⁰

Based on the information provided by Herodotus, a number of scholars have posited the existence of a vast Chorasmian Empire, with a center in Herat, which exercised hegemony over the tribes that

Herodotus states received water from the Aces.³¹ Some scholars have even argued that this empire constituted the kingdom of Kavi Vishtaspa and his predecessors, but such speculation is problematic on numerous counts. It is likely that the rulers of any pre-Achaemenid “Chorasmian” polity had strong ties to the Sakas. Not only did Saka hordes overrun Areia (like the rest of northern and eastern Iran) during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, but the lower Oxus region contained a mixed population of Iranian and Turanian tribes.³² Herodotus’ passage may, therefore, relate to the memory of a short-lived nomadic state or federation that controlled both Areia and the Oxus lowlands before the Persian conquest.

Like the Bactrians, the Chorasmians must have had a long history of political interactions with the Medes. Several scholars have even supposed that, in the years preceding Cyrus’ arrival, both Medes and Bactrians had encroached upon “Chorasmian” territory.³³ This notion is entirely reasonable and receives implicit support in the Bisutun Inscription’s reference to Margiana (a necessary stopping point for invaders from the lower Oxus en route to Herat) as a district within Bactria.

A final potential political formation with which Cyrus had to deal was that of the Thamanaeans. Herodotus is the only classical author to mention this group, and he clearly uses the term “Thamanaean” to denote the more widely attested Arachosians of the Iranian sources and Alexander historians. What is the explanation for this alternate designation? Already in the nineteenth century, scholars recognized an etymological connection between the Thamanaean name and *Sama*, the epithet of the Avestan hero

Keresaspa (New Persian *Garshasp*), one of the forerunners of Ferdowsi's Rostam.³⁴ As the genealogies of the *Shahnameh* and the heroic cycles of Sistan demonstrate, *Saman* (the plural of *Sama* from which Herodotus' "Thamanaean" derives) was the name of the dynasty to which Rostam and the legendary kings of Sistan belonged. The local prestige of this name was immense. As coins of the first century CE demonstrate, Parthian princes of the Surena family, to which the Arsacid kings granted fiefdoms in Sistan and Arachosia, ruled under the sobriquet *Sama*.³⁵ Furthermore, the name would later resurface as that of the first Iranian state of the Islamic period, the Samanid kingdom, which was headquartered in Transoxiana and became famous for its patronage of the arts.³⁶

So the Thamanaeans were Arachosia's ruling family, which claimed descent from one of Iran's legendary heroes, and either Herodotus or his source mistakenly applied their name to the Arachosian people themselves. That the Thamanaeans exercised a considerable measure of political influence beyond Arachosia proper seems plausible based on the sweeping authority granted to the satrap of Arachosia in the early Achaemenid period. As the Bisutun Inscription provides with respect to the events of 522–521 BCE, this satrap governed not just Arachosia itself but also the hill country and oases to the south of the Hindu Kush, as far as the Punjab. Because early Achaemenid satrapies were generally founded upon pre-existing state structures, it is possible that the Thamanaeans presided over a kingdom or federation that encompassed all the lands attached to the satrapy of Arachosia.³⁷ They were, at any rate, the most

powerful clan in southeastern Iran, though at the time of Persia's rise they were just one of many Iranian dynasties against which Cyrus drew his sword.

A Search for Heritage?

One detail that stands out in any reconstruction of events is the sense of purpose with which Cyrus pursued his eastern conquests. Herodotus states that Cyrus resolved to spread his rule over the whole of Upper Asia so as to “not suffer any nation to escape,” and our chronology indicates that he spent nearly five years campaigning in the east before marching on Babylon.³⁸ Cyrus' death beyond the northeastern frontier of his empire in 530 BCE further testifies to his preoccupation with the east. What was the basis for this profound interest?

No doubt, Cyrus accurately perceived the strategic importance of eastern Iran and west Central Asia as a bulwark against potential raids by the barbarian tribes of the steppes. Memories of the nomadic invasions of the previous century were still fresh in the minds of the western Iranians, who never forgot how the vast majority of Scythian and Saka tribes that overran Media had come from the east. Clearly, one reason why Cyrus would have wanted to secure his grip over such lands as Bactria and Chorasmia was to prevent the occurrence of a similar catastrophe.

But the Persian conqueror seems to have been drawn there by something else, as well – namely, that Persia's heritage lay to the east. The Persians of Cyrus' time were keenly aware that they were relative

newcomers to their homeland in southwestern Iran and that they were of a different stock than the indigenous peoples whose territory they had occupied. Portions of the Young Avesta pay lip service to the region considered to be the true cradle of Iranian civilization: the eastern lands of Drangiana, Aria, Margiana, Bactria, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia.³⁹ To the Medes and Persians, these lands had become synonymous with the legendary Aryan Abode, the utopian homeland of the Iranian tribes. As the writings of the later Greek and Roman authors suggest, Cyrus probably grew up believing that the famous Kavi Vishtaspa, patron of the prophet Zoroaster, had been a powerful king in Bactria.

Cyrus' very name and that of his father may have served as additional reminders of the Persians' eastern origins. A number of scholars have noted the etymological connection between the Old Persian personal names "Cyrus" and "Cambyses" and the tribal names of the Kurus and Kambojas.⁴¹ These tribes appear to have moved from Central Asia to western Iran at the forefront of the nomadic invasions of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.⁴⁰ According to certain scholars, the personal names "Cyrus" and "Cambyses" reflect the union between these itinerant groups and the Persians. Assuming this theory to be valid, Cyrus, may have been the descendant of a Kuru or Kamboja prince and, as such, would have had an immediate motive for attempting to annex the eastern remnants of his ancestral tribe.

Of course, none of this means that idealistic concerns overshadowed the desire for power, wealth, and security that typically drove conquerors such as Cyrus to subjugate foreign lands. Cyrus' army marched

with one basic goal in mind – to conquer – and as we will soon see, the Persian king acted ruthlessly on at least one occasion during his eastern campaigns.** However, he must also have understood even on the eve of his first great expedition into the east that he could facilitate his conquests and make them longer lasting by cultivating the common ethnic bonds that ran between the eastern Iranians, on the one hand, and the Medes and Persians, on the other. We may even imagine that he became increasingly preoccupied with this aspect of his empire-building as his armies penetrated farther into the east. If nothing else, his march must have taught him that the Iranian world was far greater than the expanse of the Iranian plateau, which he had ruled since 550 BCE. The intrinsic excitement of discovering religious artifacts and possibly reaching the Aryan Abode, “the first and best of places and habitations,” where, according to the Avesta, men once lived without fear of death, sorrow, or illness, must also have piqued the interest of Cyrus and his men. Their march may have had something of the same feel as the Ottoman campaign to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1517 CE.

From Persia to Bactria

It was with spirit and emotion, then, that Cyrus set out to conquer Bactria and the lands beyond. The army that he led was, by now, a seasoned fighting force that had already proven its superiority against both the Medes and Lydians. Still, the present undertaking was undoubtedly a bold venture, full of the inherent dangers and thrills of discovering new

lands and peoples. As Strabo provides in a statement that we should perhaps not take too literally, the “tribes one encounters in going from Hyrcania toward the rising sun as far as Sogdiana became known at first to the Persians.”⁴¹

We may attempt to trace the route taken by Cyrus based on the information presented in the later sources. The Alexander historians provide that Cyrus marched past the Etymandrus (Helmand) River en route to the land of the Scythians, and Pliny describes the Persian king’s activities at Capisa (modern Begram, situated at the juncture of the Ghorband and Panjshir valleys near Kabul) and along the banks of the Jaxartes River in Sogdiana. Putting these pieces together, it would seem that Cyrus traversed Drangiana, Arachosia, and Gandara on the way to Bactria and Transoxiana.⁴²

“Drangiana” represents the Greek rendering of Old Persian **Dranka*, which the royal inscriptions transmit in the native eastern Iranian or Median form, *Zranka*, meaning the “Land by the Sea.”⁴³ At a glance, the name seems curious for a land-locked region that today encompasses mostly arid wastes. However, the sources assure us that Drangiana was once a prosperous agricultural center, which declined due, among other things, to Tamerlane’s purposeful destruction of local irrigation systems in the fourteenth century CE.⁴⁴ The region’s most notable geographical feature has always been Lake Hamun, which the ancient Iranians spoke of as a sea, hence the name **Dranka/Zranka*. In antiquity, a settlement known as Phrada existed on the promontory of the basalt mountain, today known as the Kuh-e Khwaja, or “Mountain of the Lord.”⁴⁵ This volcanic outgrowth

overlooks the delta where the Etymandrus River feeds into the Hamun and is a scenic island for most of the year. From Herodotus, we know that the Drangians of the sixth century BCE still went to battle in the fashion of the old Aryan warriors, dressed in brightly colored garments and knee-high boots and armed with bows and spears.⁴⁶ They may have been valorous, but they were certainly no match for the better-equipped and better-organized Persians. Cyrus, like Alexander, must have occupied Drangiana with little difficulty.

In Drangiana, as in other parts of eastern Iran, the Persians must have felt they were treading upon the footsteps of Zoroaster. Even in ancient times, the Hamun region was closely linked to the mysterious prophet and spotted with holy sites. During the Parthian and Sasanid periods, if not earlier, Kuh-e Khwaja served as a place of pilgrimage, and numerous scholars believe Drangiana to have been Zoroaster's homeland.⁴⁷ This theory predictably entails several difficulties, but it seems safe to say that a considerable portion of the Young Avesta was composed in Drangiana, one of the main centers of Zoroastrian learning that influenced the Persians.⁴⁸ Cyrus' men must have listened attentively as the native Drangians explained to them that the Saoshyant, the Zoroastrian savior, would victoriously emerge from the Hamun at the end of days.[†] Such stories undoubtedly stirred the Persians' excitement and caused a general murmur in the ranks, but as Cyrus and his men would soon find out, Drangiana was not the only eastern Iranian country to claim an association with the prophet.

Throughout antiquity, the easiest way eastward from Drangiana was to follow the fertile Etymandrus to its confluence with the Arachotus River (Avestan

Harakhvaiti, New Persian *Argandab*) at Bust, and the Alexander historians indicate that Cyrus took this path.⁴⁹ At first, the Persians must have proceeded with relative ease, living off the plentiful crops and livestock of the local farmers, but in his haste, Cyrus strayed from the river, apparently in an effort to reach the mountains to the north. This was a mistake. Having not adequately reconnoitered the route, the Persian army, with its cumbersome baggage train and cavalry corps, lumbered across the jagged mountains at an excruciatingly slow pace. The barren terrain offered little in the way of food and shelter, and the soldiers suffered greatly from hunger and exposure to the snow and cold mountain winds. For a moment, it must have seemed as if the headstrong Persian king and his seemingly invincible army had finally met their match. The situation was drastic.

We might imagine how Cyrus reacted based on how other Persian commanders coped with similar catastrophes. Like most ancient peoples, the Persians typically used sorcery to try to influence the forces of nature. Herodotus describes how the Magi used magical spells to ward off a terrible storm that wreaked havoc on Xerxes' fleet in 480 BCE, and Cyrus no doubt summoned his priests to perform similar rituals, if only to lift the spirits of his men.⁵⁰ If the prayers and incantations of the holy men failed, the Great King would have attempted to invoke the mercy of the gods himself. The ritual he would have performed was probably an archaic ceremony borne out of the old Aryan cult of the sword.⁵¹ The ancient Iranians attached mystical qualities to their swords and believed the blades of their kings to possess magical powers, specifically, the ability to control the

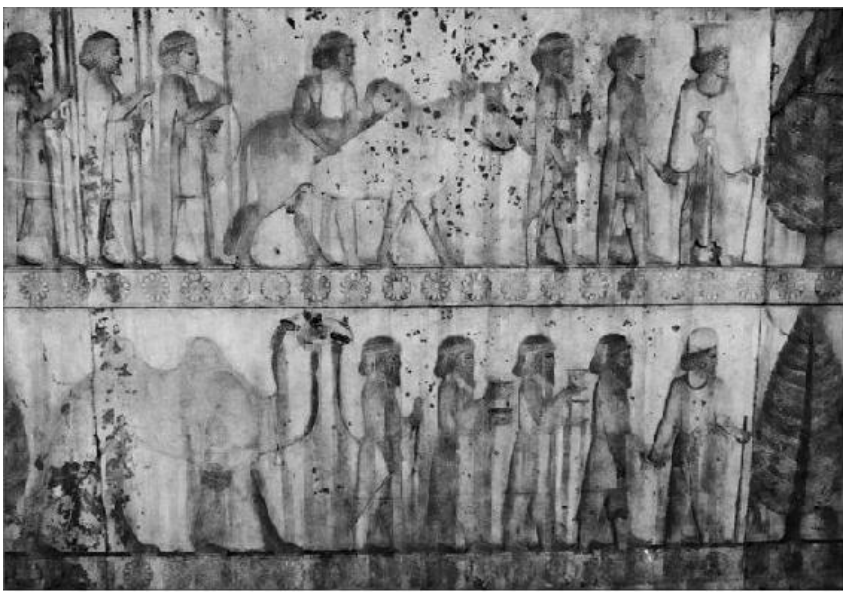
weather. Ctesias writes that Artaxerxes II thrice conjured rainfall by invoking the powers of his Indian sword, and Polyaeus reports that Darius I once saved his army from drought by planting into the earth his scepter (like the sword, a symbol of the king's military might), kneeling before it, and uttering a prayer.⁵²

If Cyrus indeed performed this ritual, the gist of his prayers was soon answered. Either through messages carried by Persian scouts or pure happenchance, a local tribe, the Ariasprians, learned of the Persians' predicament and rushed to their aid with food, blankets, and extra tents.⁵³ Cyrus praised the Ariasprians for their hospitality and bestowed upon them the title of "Royal Benefactors" (Old Persian **Huvarzaka*). This title was traditionally reserved for those who rendered the highest service to the king, and its bearers enjoyed special privileges. Alexander's chroniclers inform us that no Persian king ever sought to impose tribute upon the Ariasprians, and we never hear of Ariasprian soldiers serving in the imperial armies. The honor in which future rulers held this tribe reflects not only the permanence of Achaemenid imperial institutions but the timeliness of the aid given to Cyrus.

Having narrowly escaped destruction, the Persians continued toward Arachosia, presumably with the help of Ariasprian guides. We cannot be sure whether Cyrus subdued the Arachosians by force or whether they submitted voluntarily. If the Persians and Arachosians did fight, then it may have afforded the former their first encounter with war elephants, for the Arachosians imported these beasts from India.⁵⁴ Bust, in particular, became famous in later times as a place where elephants were stabled.⁵⁵ However,

Herodotus' reference to the Arachosians as Thamanaeans demonstrates that the country's leading family continued to enjoy high social standing in the fifth century BCE. This, in turn, implies a relatively peaceful submission. The residence of the Thamanaeans was in all likelihood the so-called "City of the Arachosians," the location of which must be sought near modern Kandahar (*Rukhaj* in the medieval sources).⁵⁶ Arshada (literally, the "Stallion-Ranch") was another important site, although it is unclear whether the Persians or natives founded it. The Bisutun Inscription mentions it as the seat of the Arachosian satrap in 521 BCE, and Ernst Herzfeld has identified it with Asfuzar, approximately halfway between Herat and Sistan.⁵⁷

The Persians continued north and east from Arachosia along the age-old caravan route to the highlands and valleys on the southern side of the Hindu Kush. The Greeks called this region "Parapamisos," which reflects Old Iranian **Para-Uparisaena*, the "Land beyond *Uparisaena*," the name of the highest peak in the region.⁵⁸ *Uparisaena*, in turn, means the "Summit too high for the *Saena*," or Simorgh, the magnificent eagle of Iranian myth that the natives believed nested in a local mountain cave (Alexander was reportedly shown this cave while marching through the Parapamisos in 329 BCE).⁵⁹ The region's Iranian name thus conveys the difficulty of the march that the Persians had to endure en route to Bactria.



Relief from the Apadana at Persepolis showing two groups of tributaries. The top register depicts Gandarans, inhabitants of the Iranian-Indian borderlands, presenting a humped bull, shields, and spears. The lower register shows Parthians (or Bactrians) offering metallic vessels and a two-humped camel. Note how the Persian (top register) and Median (lower register) staff-bearing ushers take the hands of the leading delegates in friendship.

The Greeks recorded the names of several local tribes, the most prominent being the Pactyans (the forebears of the modern Pashtuns), who were observed to be a rugged people and wearers of heavy fur coats.⁶⁰ The Pactyans appear to have been of mixed Iranian and Indian descent, which is not surprising since the Hindu Kush has historically served as a transitional zone between these two civilizations.⁶¹ In Cyrus' day, the Indians may have outnumbered the Iranians, especially in the warmer valleys, for the Old Persian texts refer to the Parapamisos by its Indian name, Gandara, and the Persepolis reliefs portray the Gandarans wearing the

loose-fitting Indian *sari*.⁶² The chief cities of Gandara were Capisa and Caspatyrus (modern Kabul). The Persians presumably fought hard to subdue both locations, but the resistance must have been strongest at Capisa, for Pliny tells us that Cyrus razed it to the ground.⁶³

Cyrus may have punished Capisa, not just to intimidate the local population, but also the Indians living near the Indus River who may have posed a threat to his army as it turned north on the road to Bactria and Central Asia.⁶⁴ It was presumably in the immediate aftermath of the city's destruction that the Indian tribes of the Asteceni and Assaceni tendered tribute to the Persian conqueror.⁶⁵

The next leg of Cyrus' journey was probably as arduous as any that he had yet endured. Known to the Greeks as the Indian Caucasus, the Hindu Kush Mountains formed the southern and eastern frontiers of Bactria. Arrian provides that "snow and privation" made Alexander's march through these mountains "a laborious task," and Quintus Curtius Rufus adds that Alexander lost many men here.⁶⁶ So must it have been for Cyrus, whose supplies, which had already failed him once in southern Afghanistan, were undoubtedly strained.

The march was no less difficult on the other side of the Hindu Kush. An arid wasteland stretched across Bactria's southern frontier, and when strong winds blew from the west, the shifting sands altered the landscape to obscure any roads that may have existed. As a result, ancient wayfarers seeking to traverse this region had to plot their course against the stars like sailors.⁶⁷ Then there were the Bactrians themselves, described by Ammianus Marcellinus as "the most

warlike people.”⁶⁸ Together with their Saka allies, they must have put up a tough fight against the invaders, as the natives of these parts have done throughout history. It is tempting to search for details of Cyrus’ military efforts against them in Ctesias’ aforementioned account of the Assyrian conquest of Bactria, for Ctesias clearly attributed certain deeds of the Persian kings to the legendary rulers of Assyria: King Ninus and Queen Semiramis.⁶⁹ By this approach, we may speak of the Persian army entering Bactria in separate columns, of the army of a vast Bactrian confederation routing some of the Persian forces in the plains preceding the Hindu Kush, of the Persians ultimately overwhelming this Bactrian army, of the Bactrian nobles abandoning their king to defend their own settlements, and of Bactra falling to Cyrus following a lengthy siege after the rest of the country’s major cities had capitulated. Unfortunately, Ctesias is too questionable a source to merit complete trust in this regard.

We do not know how many battles Cyrus fought or how much blood was spilled, but in the end, the Persians conquered Bactria and took control of its cities. The wealth of Bactria’s treasure houses was seized and eventually hauled back to Persia, and the country was organized into a province and placed under the control of a Persian satrap.

Still, Cyrus took care not to alienate the Bactrian people or to disturb the local power structure too radically. Assemblies of Bactrian nobles are known to have convened regularly throughout the Achaemenid period, and this indicates that, as elsewhere in the east, Persian rule in Bactria was based upon hegemonic principles, such that local government

remained largely in the hands of the native aristocrats.⁷⁰

Like Drangiana, Bactria was home to a strong Zoroastrian tradition, which continued undisturbed through the Achaemenid period.⁷¹ Later Iranian texts attribute the founding of Bactra to Kavi Vishtaspa's father, Kavi Aurvataspa (New Persian *Lohrasp*), he of the "Swift Horses." Among the Zoroastrian relics that Cyrus may have seen in Bactria were a crude statue, reputed to be the only authentic portrait of the prophet, and the famous cypress tree that, according to later generations, Zoroaster himself planted outside of Bactra to signify the spread of the Good Religion under the care of Vishtaspa's family.⁷² This tree was one of several that the prophet reportedly planted at different locations in eastern Iran, the most famous being the celebrated cypress of Kishmar, a suburb of Nishapur in Khorasan. According to the medieval *Dabistan*, pilgrims flocked to Kishmar for some 1,450 years, until the tenth Abbasid caliph Mutawakil had the tree chopped down in 846 CE.⁷³ Such was the fate of Zoroastrianism in Iran.

Conquests in Transoxiana

It was from Bactra that Cyrus presumably subdued Chorasmia, Sogdiana, and other territories in Transoxiana. The Persians would appear to have fought particularly hard to subjugate the Chorasmians. Not only do the ruins of Kyuzeli Gyr, the most important archaeological site within the boundaries of ancient Chorasmia, bear evidence of damage

seemingly linked to Cyrus' conquest, but either Cyrus or one of his Achaemenid successors seems to have resorted to a novel method of enforcing Achaemenid rule over this potentially recalcitrant nation.⁷⁴ Specifically, the Persians dammed the local rivers and manipulated the flow of water through sluice gates to control the local population.⁷⁵ This constitutes one of the earliest known examples of water distribution being used as a political tool.

East of Chorasmia and north of Bactria on the other side of the Oxus lay Sogdiana. Although frequently mentioned in the classical sources, very little is known about this ancient land. Historically, it had close ties to Bactria. Both Achaemenids and Greeks seem to have administered Bactria and Sogdiana as a single political unit.⁷⁶ In late antiquity, the Sogdians became famous merchants, traveling as far abroad as Scandinavia and eastern China to strike a profit. Sogdiana must have been a frequent target of nomadic raids. The *Videvdta* speaks of the lands along the Jaxartes as suffering from inroads by Turanian tribes, and Strabo describes the Sogdians as being heavily influenced by the Sakas.⁷⁷ The main settlement in Sogdiana was Maracanda, or Samarkand, along the Polytimetus (Zarafshan) River.

Cyrus appears to have taken a profound interest in the affairs of the Sogdians and to have treated them particularly well. Strabo states that the inhabitants of Memicene, a district in northern Sogdiana corresponding to medieval Ushrusana, were "fond" of Cyrus, and Pliny alludes to Cyrus' construction of fire altars in the vicinity of modern Khojand:

At this place there are altars set up by Hercules and Father Liber [Dionysius], and also by Cyrus and Semiramis and by

Alexander, all of whom found their limit in this region of the world, where they were shut in by the river Jaxartes, which the Scythians call the Silis and which Alexander and his soldiers supposed was the Don . . . Beyond are some tribes of Scythians⁷⁸

Cyrus' building of altars along this frontier recalls the actions of Xerxes, who poured magnificent libations to the spirits – or, in Iranian parlance, the *fravashis* – of the Trojan heroes in 480 BCE. The purpose of this ceremony, staged by the ruins of Troy, was to symbolize Persia's inheritance of the ancient struggle between the native Asiatics and the Greeks.⁷⁹ Cyrus may have had a similar motive in mind in constructing fire altars in Sogdiana, where the steppe nomads were the age-old enemy.[‡]

The Persians called at least one group of nomads in these parts the Saka Haumavarga. They appear to have been identical to the “Sakas of the Plains,” mentioned in Darius I's Egyptian inscriptions, and maybe also to the “Sakas who are beyond Sogdiana,” named in his foundation tablets. The Greeks knew them as the Amyrgian Scythians and ascribed an ancestral homeland to them in the so-called Amyrgion Plain, which various scholars have located in Ferghana, the Pamirs, or Chinese Xinjiang.⁸⁰ However, other scholars have attributed to these Sakas a broader expanse, ranging from the pasturelands of Transoxiana and the Caspian steppe, as far south as Margiana.⁸¹

The *Persica* contains a semi-legendary account of Cyrus' expedition against the Saka Haumavarga. According to Photius' summary, after receiving the submission of the Bactrians:

Cyrus made war on the Sakas, and took prisoner their king

Amorges, the husband of Sparethra, who, after her husband was captured, collected an army of 300,000 men and 200,000 women, made war upon Cyrus, and defeated him. Among the large number of prisoners taken by the Sakas were Parmises, the brother of Amytis [presumably from a separate father], and his three sons, who were subsequently released in exchange for Amorges.⁸²

Ctesias later presents Amorges as a staunch ally of Cyrus.⁸³ His account is clearly embellished and draws upon the popular motif of an Iranian king suffering defeat at the hands of an Amazon queen.⁸⁴ The truth behind such tales rests in the military traditions of the steppe tribes such as the Sarmatians, whose women fought alongside their men.⁸⁴

An equally fanciful tale that, in all likelihood, relates to Cyrus' war against the Saka Haumavarga may be found in Strabo's *Geographies*. Drawing upon unnamed sources, this author relates:

Others say that Cyrus made an expedition against the Sakas, was defeated in the battle, and fled; but that he encamped in the place where he had left behind his supplies, which consisted of an abundance of everything and especially of wine, rested his army a short time, and set out at nightfall, as though he were in flight, leaving the tents full of supplies; and that he proceeded as far as he thought best and halted; and that the Sakas pursued, found the camp empty of men but full of things conducive to enjoyment, and filled themselves to the full; and that Cyrus turned back, and found them drunk and crazed, so that some were slain while lying stupefied and asleep, whereas others fell victims to the arms of the enemy while dancing and reveling naked, and almost all perished; and Cyrus, regarding the happy issue as of divine origin, consecrated that day to the goddess of his fathers and called it Sacaea.⁸⁵

Strabo's story features the common literary motif of the Sakas suffering defeat due to their drunkenness.⁸⁶ The motif may have been especially

significant with respect to the Saka Haumavarga, given the link between their name and the intoxicating *haoma* beverage.⁸⁶

For Cyrus, Sogdiana was the most distant land in the northeast under firm Persian control. The conqueror established a network of seven fortresses to safeguard this region against nomadic incursions from across the Jaxartes.⁸⁷ The fortresses were located at key passes through which nomadic itinerants from Central Asia had to pass en route to the inhabitable oases of Transoxiana. The Greeks called the most important stronghold Cyreschata (the “Farthest City Founded by Cyrus”) or Cyropolis (the “City of Cyrus”).⁸⁸ It was situated along the Jaxartes near modern Kurkath, which preserves the site’s Old Persian name, **Kuru(sh)-katha*, the “Reinforced Settlement of Cyrus.”⁸⁹ This settlement remained a powerful fortress until Alexander destroyed it in 327 BCE. Of the other six fortresses, the sources name only those at Ganza (modern Ghazni) and Samarkand, where new fortifications were raised atop existing structures.⁹⁰ Judging from its name, Ganza, the “Treasury,” served as the central supply depot.⁹¹ That sizable communities thrived at these sites until relatively recent times shows how astutely Cyrus had appraised their strategic location.⁹² Having ordered their construction, Cyrus retired to Persia, thus concluding his first major campaign into the east.

The Approaches to India

During his trek through Arachosia and Gandara,

Cyrus must have heard many reports about the fabulous wealth of India. According to Herodotus, so much gold flowed in the Indus River that the natives made a fortune collecting the little bits of gold dust kicked up by “giant ants” burrowing near its banks.⁹³ Explorers of the Himalayas have recently confirmed the basis of this tall tale: Herodotus’ ants are really marmots, a species of thick-bodied squirrel known locally as “mountain-ants,” and the primitive Minaro tribesmen living along the present-day border between India and Pakistan still scavenge for gold by following these animals.⁹⁴ Beyond the Indus lay several republics and kingdoms, some of which were famous for their extreme opulence. Although Cyrus could hardly have heard his name, Siddhartha Gautama, the prince of one such kingdom, would soon attain renown as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One,” by preaching a religion every bit as lofty and high-minded as Zoroastrianism.



Relief from Persepolis showing an Indian tribute-bearer presenting two pots of gold dust to the king. According to Herodotus, India was the wealthiest satrapy of Darius I's empire.

These reports must have enticed the Persian king to attempt the conquest of western India soon after concluding his first eastern campaign. Cyrus' route to India consisted of a more or less straight path from southern Kerman through the wastes of coastal

Baluchistan. It was a seldom-traveled road, which Alexander took, with disastrous results, in the opposite direction in 324 BCE. The first leg of Cyrus' journey took him through the tortuous defiles of the Bashagard Mountains in what is now the Iranian province of Hormozgan. These mountains have historically served as a haven for displaced tribes, and the Persians called the hodgepodge of ethnically diverse peoples that they encountered here the *Akaufachiya*, or "Mountain-Dwellers."⁹⁵ Their reputation as savages persisted into the Islamic era, when they were known as the Qofs.⁹⁶

From the land of the Mountain-Dwellers, the Persians pushed eastward to the outskirts of the Gedrosian desert in present-day Baluchistan. Here, the Persians encountered scattered clans of Utians and two other peoples, known to the Greeks as the Paricanians and Mycians.⁹⁷ The Alexander historians give the name of the principal settlement in this region as Pura, which ostensibly corresponds to modern Bampur and the *Purrush* of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. The Achaemenid inscriptions appear to reference this region by the toponym Maka, which may survive in modern Makran.⁹⁸

The march through Baluchistan must have been grueling for the Persian army. The region has always been a sheer wasteland, and modern Baluchis joke that God created their country from the refuse of his other creations.⁹⁹ The coastal region was particularly squalid in antiquity, as evidenced by the extreme poverty of its inhabitants; Nearchus, Alexander's admiral who conducted a naval reconnaissance of the coastline, found people who ate only fish, wore no clothes, and dwelt in small houses built from the

bones of dead whales.¹⁰⁰ Alexander reportedly led his troops through these parts as punishment for their refusal to march into India, and heat, thirst, and exhaustion claimed nearly two-thirds of his army on that occasion. Most of his animals died, too, many from burns suffered when they sank into the sand while traversing the dunes. For this reason, Alexander quickly learned to move his army at night, but even this became difficult due to the scarcity of water, which made regular marches impossible. That Darius, and not Cyrus, became the first Persian king to reach the lower Indus (Old Persian *Hindush*) indicates that Cyrus' men found the blazing sun and white hot sands of the Gedrosian desert intolerable. Alexander's historians actually provide that Cyrus lost all but seven members of his army during his passage to India and that his men resorted to cannibalism.¹⁰¹ Some scholars have treated these tall tales as reliable, since other military leaders have suffered heavy casualties here.¹⁰² However, it is more than a bit suspicious that the Greek authors always juxtapose the tales of Cyrus' failed march alongside those of Alexander's costly but successful passage through the same region. Indeed, they claim that Alexander desired to proceed through the treacherous Gedrosian desert, in part, to outdo Cyrus, and also Semiramis, who reportedly made it through with only twenty-three men. As such, most scholars view the stories of Cyrus' debacle as pure fabrications, intended to put a positive spin on an embarrassing episode in Alexander's military career.¹⁰³

That Cyrus' march through Gedrosia did not end in utter disaster is apparent from the Near Eastern sources. Pura appears as an important satrapal residence in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, and

Maka's enumeration as a subject land in the Bisutun Inscription points to the subjugation of the Makran coastline. So although Cyrus may have aborted his assault upon the Indus delta, he still added new territories to his empire. He even conquered certain Indian tribes. The Sattagydians (Old Persian *Thatagush*) were an Indian people named as Persian subjects in the Bisutun Inscription. Their emissaries appear at Persepolis wearing loincloths and with their hair bundled up on the crowns of their heads, as in traditional representations of the Buddha. The exact location of Sattagydia is unclear. Most scholars situate it in the Punjab or to the west of the middle Indus.¹⁰⁴ The latter location is perhaps preferable based on recent archaeological finds at Akra in northwestern Pakistan and the information in the Bisutun Inscription, which indicates that the Arachosian satrap had jurisdiction over Sattagydia.¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately for Cyrus, neither the Punjab nor the middle Indus was particularly wealthy. Babylonia, and not India, was destined to be the jewel of the Persian crown, and it was there that the conqueror fixed his gaze.

§ This is particularly true with respect to Cyrus' attack upon the countries of the southeast; see pages 179–182, 251.

¶ See page Appendix II.

** See page 173.

† Herzfeld identifies Kuh-e Khwaja with the Mons Victoralis (“Mount Victory”) of the *Acts of Thomas*. According to the *Acts*, the Magi who paid homage to the infant Jesus spotted the Star of Bethlehem from Mons Victoralis and set out from there. See Herzfeld (1968), 331–332.

‡ One might also draw an analogy to the Sasanid practice of establishing fire altars abroad to consecrate foreign soil for incorporation into Eranshahr. The significance of this incorporation was not political, for the Sasanids readily acknowledged their rule over lands classified as non-Iranian, but rather cultural and spiritual. Such sentiment might explain Cyrus' construction of altars by the

Jaxartes, assuming he wished to include Sogdiana and the rest of Transoxiana within the cultural orbit of Iran, as opposed to the Turanian world of the Central Asian steppe.

§ For other legends featuring the same theme, see pages 36 and 394.

¶ For a discussion of this motif, see Appendix XVIII.

The Fall of a Civilization: The Persian Conquest of Babylonia

When I entered Babylon in a peaceful manner, I took up my lordly residence in the royal palace amid rejoicing and happiness. Marduk, the great lord, caused the magnanimous people of Babylon to love me, and I daily attended to his worship.

—The Cyrus Cylinder

It has been stated that “a great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.”¹ Such was the case with the fall of Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

Babylon, the “Gateway of the Gods,” had been the greatest city in the ancient world and a true beacon of civilization since the middle of the third millennium BCE. It had produced one of the most illustrious rulers of antiquity, Hammurabi, whose famous legal code signified Babylon’s dedication to justice and influenced the biblical laws of the Book of Leviticus. Approximately two centuries before Cyrus, Babylon’s electoral assembly had made its voice heard by securing the right to a fair trial for any citizen accused

of a crime, as well as by receiving written assurances from the royal government that full citizens would be exempted from military and corvée duty.² Babylon was also one of the ancient world's premiere scientific centers. Babylonian scholars, usually affiliated with the city's great temples, had prioritized the study of arithmetic, geography, and medicine. Special emphasis was laid upon astronomy, a science with which many ancient cultures pre-occupied themselves but which the Babylonians took to new heights. Babylonian astronomers used the uppermost platforms of the city's ziggurats as observatories to chart the positions of the seven heavenly bodies and the twelve signs of the zodiac.

However, the Babylonians did not study the stars purely for scientific gain. Astrology concerned them more, and it is here that we begin to broach what the Iranians and others deemed to be the city's dark side. Temples had been the centerpieces of Babylonian civilization since the beginning; the Babylonians themselves were exceedingly superstitious, and science and the occult became inexorably intertwined. The Babylonians studied planetary movements primarily for soothsaying purposes, and Babylonian physicians more often than not attempted to treat well-diagnosed medical ailments by purging evil, malady-causing spirits. An interesting dichotomy thus evolved among the city's intelligentsia. The same cultural milieu that produced physicians capable of healing exotropia of the eye and philosophers who debated the merits of agnosticism perpetuated what we today would call magic.³ Rumors of star-gazers, exorcists, and wizards teeming in Babylon abounded in neighboring lands and even among the city's

inhabitants. Hebrew prophets seething at the “Babylonian Captivity” imposed upon them by Nabuchadnezzar II denigrated the city as a pit of sorcery. It was much more, of course, but the same stereotyped image occurs in the Iranian legends. The Iranians remembered Babylon as one of Azhi Dahaka’s haunts and as the birthplace of idolatry and witchcraft.⁴

Aside from magic and superstition, Babylon was famous for its earthly sins. According to the Latin author Quintus Curtius Rufus, “the moral depravity there is unparalleled; its ability to stimulate and arouse the senses is incomparable . . . The Babylonians are especially addicted to wine and the excesses that go along with drunkenness. Women attend dinner parties. At first they are decently dressed, then they remove all their top-clothing and by degrees disgrace their respectability . . . until they finally throw off their most intimate garments. This disgusting conduct is characteristic not only of courtesans but also of married women and young girls, who regard such vile prostitution as ‘being sociable.’”⁵ Even the city’s temples inserted themselves into the mix. Sponsoring sacred prostitution promised large profits, and the priests of Ishtar, the chief fertility goddess, and her divine consort Tammuz quickly cornered the market.⁶ Herodotus, who visited Babylon in the fifth century BCE, observed:

Every woman who lives in that country must once in her lifetime go to the temple of Aphrodite [Ishtar] and sit there and be lain with by a strange man . . . When once a woman has taken her seat there, she may not go home until one of the strangers throws a piece of silver into her lap and lies with her, outside the temple. As he throws a coin, the man says, “I summon you in the name of Mylitta.” (The Assyrians

call Aphrodite Mylitta.)** The greatness of the coin may be what it may, for it is not lawful to reject it, since this money, once it is thrown, becomes sacred. The woman must follow the first man who throws the money into her lap and may reject none. Once she has lain with him, she has fulfilled her obligation to the goddess and gets gone to her home. From that time forth, you cannot give her any sum large enough to get her. Those women who have attained to great beauty and height depart quickly enough, but those who are ugly abide there a great while, being unable to fulfill the law. Some, indeed, stay there as much as three or four years.⁷

Although ritual prostitution was by no means unique to Babylon (the Levantines, Lydians, and Greeks practiced it as well), the city's detractors were quick to point a judging finger. "Babylon, the scarlet whore . . . mother of prostitutes and abominations," wrote the author of the Book of Revelations.⁸ The ancient Israelites had good reason to despise Babylon, and their tirades must always be taken with a grain of salt, but the truth remains that Babylon was a decadent and opulent place. It had more material wealth than any other city, and its leaders, softened by years of easy living, lacked the military fortitude to repel the attack when Cyrus, fresh off his eastern campaigns, made the decisive move to capture the "Land Between the Rivers" in 539 BCE.



The Babylonian Marriage Market, a painting by the nineteenth-century English painter Edwin Long that is based on a passage in *The Histories*.

As we will see, Cyrus' success in this momentous undertaking was easier than it should have been. Nabuchadnezzar had taken strong and affirmative steps to protect his capital against invasion from the Iranian plateau. In addition to the famous Median Wall located to the north of the imperial capital, the Chaldean conqueror had created an artificial marsh beyond Babylon's suburbs and had manipulated the course of the Euphrates River, which flowed through the center of the city, to create obstacles for invading armies. A man-made lake near Sippar, the waters of which could be released to flood the entire plain to the north and east of Babylon, served as a further precaution. As to the city itself, Nabuchadnezzar had fortified Babylon's perimeter with a deep moat 300 feet across and walls of brick and bitumen between 25 and 50 feet tall and over 85 feet thick.⁹ Massive towers projected from these walls at regular intervals, and four-horsed chariots patrolled the sheltered battlements.¹⁰ With soaring pride, Nabuchadnezzar

boasted of his city's fortifications:

In order to strengthen the defenses of Esagila [Marduk's main temple] that the evil and the wicked might not oppress Babylon, that which no king had done before me, at the outskirts of Babylon to the east I put about a great wall. Its moat I dug and its inner-moat wall with mortar and brick I raised mountain-high. About the sides of Babylon great banks of earth I heaped up. Great floods of destroying water like the great waves of the sea I made to flow about it; with marsh I surrounded it.¹¹

Two sets of inner fortifications and another moat protected the inner city, where most of Babylon's temples and palaces were situated. Even the banks of the Euphrates were walled within the city limits to prevent an amphibious assault. Babylon had no weak points.

Alas, Nabuchadnezzar's engineers could not safeguard against the treacherous impulses of a society that had advanced far beyond the tribal level, where the simple goal of protecting one's kin superseded all else. When Cyrus entered Mesopotamia to conquer Babylon, he had the comfort of knowing that many of Nabonidus' subjects were on his side. Babylon was indeed Cyrus' greatest conquest, not just because of the prize itself, but because of the manner in which the conquest was achieved, for, in embarking upon what should have been a long and devastating war, Cyrus masterfully utilized the experience of his previous campaigns to seize the strongest city on earth, almost without a fight. The fall of Babylon represents one of history's compelling tales.

A Land in Turmoil

Cultural, religious, and social strife were ultimately what facilitated Babylon's fall to the Persians. The four main ethnic groups of sixth century BCE Mesopotamia were the Assyrians, Babylonians, Aramaeans, and Chaldeans. The Assyrians had lost all importance following the destruction of their empire, while the warlike temper of the Babylonians, the substrate population of southern Mesopotamia, had long since been diminished. This left the Aramaeans and Chaldeans, also dwellers of the south. Both groups had migrated from the Arabian Peninsula between the eleventh and eighth centuries BCE.¹² Whereas linguistic similarities had facilitated the amalgamation of the Chaldeans and Babylonians to the point that non-natives could no longer tell them apart, the Aramaeans remained culturally distinct.¹³ The crucial turning point in the ethnic history of the region proved to be Nabonidus' accession, which signaled the transfer of power from the Chaldean dynasty of Nabopolassar and Nabuchadnezzar to an Aramaean family from Harran. The impact of this transition was felt throughout Babylonian society but most immediately in the realm of religion.

Whereas the Chaldeans worshipped the traditional gods of the Babylonian pantheon, the Aramaeans had their own divinities. It seems reasonable to assume, as is often done, that Nabonidus planned an unpopular reform aimed at replacing Marduk (commonly referred to as "Bel," meaning the "Lord") with Sin at the head of the Babylonian pantheon. Nabonidus had always harbored such aspirations, but the precariousness of his position at the outset of his reign – Nabonidus was, after all, a usurper – led him

to pay lip service to Marduk during his first few years as king.¹⁴ Such lip service was necessary, for Marduk's priests had played a prominent role in Babylonian politics since the final years of Nabuchadnezzar's reign. They had apparently helped depose Neriglissar and had raised Labashi-Marduk, Nabonidus' immediate predecessor, to the throne. Early clashes between Nabonidus and the Marduk priesthood precipitated the former's ten-year hiatus in the Tema oasis in the Arabian Peninsula. Rumor had it that Nabonidus planned to move the imperial capital to Tema, where he had already constructed a palace like the one in Babylon and a massive temple dedicated to Sin.¹⁵ This construction project in the southern reaches of the empire mirrored the massive temple restoration already underway in Nabonidus' ancestral abode of Harran in the north, far from Babylon.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of Nabonidus' disdain for Babylonia's traditional religion involved his refusal to participate in the all-important Akitu, or New Year's festival, throughout the term of his sojourn in Tema. Originally an agricultural holiday, the Akitu was celebrated in Babylon for an entire week, beginning on the fourth day of spring. The high point of the celebration was a magnificent parade through the famous Processional Way. During the parade, wooden barges laden with man-sized images of the gods were hauled past the crowds. The most ornate barge belonged to Marduk, whose idol, brought from the innermost shrine of Esagila, was adorned in gold. Fundamentally, the Akitu operated to affirm Marduk's supremacy within the pantheon and Babylon's primacy within the empire.[†] The king played an important role in the Akitu. Tradition

required him to grasp Marduk's hand to ensure his continued rule with the support of the god. But Nabonidus refused to seek Marduk's blessing. The same dreary entry appears in the Babylonian Chronicle for each year Nabonidus was away: "The king remained in Tema. The prince, the officers, and the army were in Akkad. In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king did not go to Babylon. Nabu did not go to Babylon. Bel did not go out. The Akitu was not celebrated."¹⁶

Nabonidus' neglect for the Akitu antagonized Marduk's priests and demoralized Babylon's inhabitants. Inscriptions from the end of his reign suggest that he viewed his stay in Tema as a means of punishing the people for opposing his attempted religious reforms.¹⁷ In an inscription of uncertain date, Nabonidus even threatened to cancel the Akitu altogether until work on Sin's temple in Harran was completed.¹⁸ As this threat implies, the people were reticent to participate in Nabonidus' heretical restoration project.



Line drawing of a carving on a Babylonian amulet depicting the god Marduk.

Nabonidus' later inscriptions further indicate that the temple building in Harran coincided with a prolonged period of famine in Mesopotamia. The cause of the famine appears to have been a change in the course of the Euphrates that diverted the river away from key agricultural fields. The fields quickly dried up, and the newly formed swamps became hotbeds for disease-laden mosquitoes.¹⁹ Such conditions made Nabonidus' demands for corvée labor extremely burdensome on the people; but Nabonidus remained adamant, and the people rallied around their traditional gods, whose priests proved less oppressive in their time of need. It may have been in retaliation for such defiance that Nabonidus increased the king's share of temple revenues and subjected

temple employees, including low-ranking priests, to corvée duty.²⁰ The disgruntled clerics condemned these measures as unjust infringements upon the long-standing rights of the urban citizenry. The competent yet unpopular Belshazzar, Nabonidus' crown prince deserves much credit for keeping the country together during these trying times.²¹



Stela from Harran showing Nabonidus with a tall staff paying homage to the symbols of Sin (the crescent moon), Shamash (the winged disc), and Ishtar (the flower-like star).

To be fair, Nabonidus' eccentric behavior may have arisen from a high-mindedness that few of his subjects could grasp. In his own inscriptions, the Babylonian king presented himself as a champion of the poor, vehemently opposed to the widespread problem of judicial misconduct. He even explained his

move to Tema on the basis that he was disappointed in the unethical behavior of his subjects. If Nabonidus' construction projects seemed oppressive, they served the higher purpose of steering the masses away from a corrupt priesthood that cared only about lining its own pockets and protecting its social standing. Deeply interested with excavating artifacts belonging to former Mesopotamian kings, Nabonidus seems to have shunned the society of his own time as a degenerate perversion of the golden past.²² But he could not afford to be king and prophet at once. His self-professed piety and rejection of society, traits typical of prophets and wilderness-wandering mystics, came across as politically negligent, and his religious obstinacy confounded the military objective commonly attributed to him of rallying the Sin-worshipping tribes of northern Arabia into an anti-Persian coalition. Religious reform was hardest to achieve in a complex society such as Babylonia, where religion, economics, and politics were inseparably intertwined.

The Jewish authors of the Book of Daniel and an Aramaic scroll from Qumran have preserved the slanderous tales that circulated among the discontented masses. In Daniel, we read of Belshazzar's father suffering a complete mental breakdown: "He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird."²³ In the Qumran text, the mad king (explicitly called Nabonidus) is made to suffer from malignant boils for refusing to worship "the God Most High."²⁴ These hyperbolic tales provide valuable insight into public

opinion. The apostate could expect no mercy in Mesopotamia's religiously charged atmosphere.

Nabonidus also faced dissidence among Babylonia's powerful merchant class. The shift in the course of the Euphrates had rendered maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and southern Babylonia tremendously difficult. The Persian Gulf historically served as the main route for the import of highly coveted Arabian and East African spices, such as frankincense and myrrh, to Babylonia. These goods were transported on small boats that sailed through the Gulf before being hauled upstream by beasts of burden to Babylon. The process, always arduous, was now completely infeasible due to the river's changed course.²⁵ Nabonidus' conquest of Tema, where caravan routes from Egypt, Damascus, Mesopotamia, and southern Arabia converged, may have represented an intelligent step toward reviving the lucrative spice trade.²⁶ However, the extent to which Nabonidus maximized the commercial opportunities created by his Arabian conquests remains unclear. Palestine certainly benefited little from the occupation of Tema, and Babylonia may have fared no better. The problem was compounded by Cyrus' preclusion of the Babylonians from overland trade along the Khorasan Road. Given the prospects of eking out a living under Nabonidus or exploiting the full range of commercial opportunities available in Cyrus' world empire, many Babylonian merchants pined for the latter.²⁷

The call for change perhaps resonated loudest among the hundreds of thousands of foreign exiles living within Babylonia proper. Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians practiced population deportation to consolidate their conquests. The most famous exiled

community within Nabonidus' empire consisted of the forty thousand or so Jews, whose ancestors Nabuchadnezzar had displaced to Babylon after conquering Jerusalem. We will give a detailed account of them in the following chapter; suffice it to state for now that they viewed Cyrus as the instrument through which Yahweh would restore them to Israel. The Jews could point to similarities between their own religion and Zoroastrianism as grounds for expecting special treatment from the Persians. But other groups living in exile had heard of Cyrus' liberal policies, too, and were, perhaps, no less hopeful that they would be freed from Babylonian captivity.

The stage was thus set for the Persian conquest. By 543 BCE, the seventy-year-old Nabonidus had finally grasped the gravity of the situation. He returned from Tema that year to oversee the final stages of the reconstruction of Sin's temple in Harran. One inscription claims that his arrival coincided with rainfall and the country's return to economic prosperity. The king even attempted to reconcile with the followers of Marduk. The Babylonian Chronicle provides that Nabonidus resumed participation in the Akitu in 543 BCE and that he continued to observe the holiday for the remainder of his reign. But it was too little, too late. The priests of Marduk and certain other gods were already conspiring with Cyrus' agents, and a pro-Persian party appears to have gained momentum in local political elections.²⁸ Less than four years later, Cyrus appeared in the mountain passes overlooking Mesopotamia with his army, ready to seize what Nabonidus could not hold for himself.

The tact with which Cyrus exploited Babylonia's internal difficulties begs the question of how the Persian king obtained his intelligence about the failing kingdom. Cyrus had certainly been hostile to Nabonidus since the latter's alliance with Croesus some time before 545 BCE. So for the better part of a decade Cyrus had had reason to inundate Babylonia with spies who could easily blend in with the thousands of Iranians and Elamites living in the country's key cities. Traveling merchants represented another source of information, especially regarding commercial and economic matters. To tap the powerful Marduk priesthood, however, Cyrus needed access to an influential person who could play a role similar to that of Harpagus during the Median war.

Gaubaruva, meaning "Cattle-Baron," was a popular name among the ancient Iranians that the Greeks transmitted as "Gobryas." Xenophon introduces a certain Gobryas about halfway through the *Cyropaedia*. He describes him as a nobleman, "well advanced in years" and by birth a Babylonian.²⁹ Gobryas approaches Cyrus during the latter's war against the Babylonians and Lydians. He declares that he possesses a castle and wide domains and that he was once the "most devoted friend" of Nabonidus.³⁰ He proceeds to state that his son had been betrothed to Nabonidus' daughter but that the marriage never occurred, because Belshazzar had killed the young man for outshining him at hunting. Although Nabonidus had expressed sorrow at the murder, there could be no reconciliation with Belshazzar:

Since the scepter has passed on to the murderer of my son, I could never be loyal to him, and he could never regard me as a friend. For he knows how I feel toward him and how dark my life now is, though once it was so bright.³¹

Gobryas places his province at Cyrus' disposal, and, in hopes of avenging himself upon Belshazzar, joins the Persian army. Cyrus immediately includes Gobryas within his circle of trust, and the aggrieved nobleman leads the Persian column that captures Babylon.

Xenophon's story reminds us of the legend concerning Harpagus' defection during the Persian-Median war.³² Indeed, the similarities between the two tales suggest that Xenophon transmitted a genuine oriental legend, the truth behind which appears in the Near Eastern sources.³³ According to the Babylonian Chronicle, days after Cyrus entered Babylon, "Gubaru [Gobryas], his [Cyrus'] governor, installed sub-governors in Babylonia."³⁴ This Gubaru clearly served Cyrus as the chief administrative officer of the new province. One administrative text mentions Gubaru's son, Nabugu, whose name supports, at least partially, Xenophon's claim that Gobryas was of Babylonian descent.³⁵ In fact, "Gobryas" may have been the Iranian name that the traitor adopted upon switching sides to join Cyrus. The adoption of a foreign pseudonym under such circumstances was commonplace in the ancient Near East. During the Assyrian period, multiple Egyptian aristocrats assumed Mesopotamian names upon receiving governorships from the Assyrian king, and many nobles in Hellenistic Babylonia carried both Greek (or Iranian) and Babylonian names.³⁶ Gobryas may have observed the same custom. In any event, the defector

would naturally have been Cyrus' key spokesman in Babylonia and the member of the Persian administration most memorable to the native population.

Earlier Conflicts Between the Persian and Babylonian Empires

The location of Gobryas' province is a vexing issue, which, if ever resolved, would shed light upon potential earlier hostilities between the Persian and Babylonian Empires. Some scholars have asserted that Gobryas was a former Babylonian district commander in the Elamite lowlands, who led an assault upon the loyal governor of Uruk in 546–545 BCE.³⁷ Unfortunately, the history of Elam during the middle decades of the sixth century BCE remains so obscure that it is impossible to confirm any speculation about Gobryas' Elamite ties. Numerous theories exist as to how and when the Persians annexed the Elamite lowlands.³⁸ However, two considerations point to a relatively early acquisition. The first pertains to the geographical and cultural proximity of Elam to Persia and Media. This factor must have made Elam an attractive target for Cyrus early on in his career of conquest, and it is, indeed, difficult to believe that the Persian king would have embarked upon distant campaigns against the Lydians and eastern Iranians before first securing control over the Elamite lowlands.³⁹

The second bit of evidence supporting an early date for the annexation of Elam is the Book of Isaiah,

which anticipates a joint attack on Babylonia by the Medes and Elamites. The relevant passage, entitled “an oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea” (the Persian Gulf), was composed by an unknown author. It begins with a description of the author’s apocalyptic vision and the physical shock that followed:

Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror. A dire vision has been shown to me, the traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she [Babylon] caused. At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see. My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me. They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!⁴⁰

The first few lines describe the imminent attack upon Babylon. The Persian Gulf desert stretches from the southern edge of Elam to Arabia. The “land of terror” is Media, the daunting mountains of which the Mesopotamians viewed as a foreboding place.[‡] Some scholars have dated this passage to a time before Cyrus’ rise.⁴¹ However, the imagery of feasting and revelry conjured up in the last two lines parallels the legends of Babylon’s fall too closely to belong to a much earlier period.[§] The passage may therefore be dated to the middle decade of Cyrus’ reign, between 549–540 BCE.⁴² These were the years in which Nabonidus recognized Cyrus as the “King of the Medes” and the Persians conquered the powerful Lydian kingdom and territories in and around the Iranian plateau, including, apparently, Elam.

Elam was not the only territory that Cyrus likely seized from Nabonidus before 540 BCE. The entry in

the Babylonian Chronicle for Nabonidus' ninth year (547–546 BCE) seems to allude to hostilities between the Persians and Babylonians in northern Mesopotamia. During that year, Cyrus and his army crossed the Tigris below Arbela, while Belshazzar and the Babylonian army were stationed at the “military camp upstream from Sippar.”⁴³ Sippar was located at the western tip of Nabuchadnezzar's Median Wall, so the reference to the military camp may reflect the preparation of defenses in anticipation of a Persian attack from the north. The same entry in the Chronicle further records the death of Nabonidus' 103-year-old mother, Adad-Guppi. Given her attachment to Harran, where she had served as the high priestess of Sin, we should expect her to have been entombed in that city, but that was not the case. Instead, the influential queen mother was buried in the military camp.⁴⁴ On the strength of this evidence, it has been suggested that Cyrus threatened Harran and subdued the surrounding countryside in the spring of 547 BCE.⁴⁵

A third location where the Babylonians and Persians probably clashed was southern Syria and the Levant. Based on information presented by Xenophon, Second Isaiah, and the Babylonian Chronicle, it has been posited that, during the years preceding Cyrus' final invasion of Babylonia, the Persians established a military presence in this region and entered into alliances with the Arabs living to the south and east of Palestine.⁴⁶ Specifically, it has been stated that Nabonidus returned from Tema in 543 BCE, because a modest Persian cavalry force had severed the line of communications between that city and the imperial capital.⁴⁷ It is clear, however, that any Persian presence in Syria and Palestine could not have been

great, for Aleppo on the Euphrates apparently remained in Babylonian hands until Cyrus' final victory in 539 BCE.⁴⁸

The picture thus emerges of a prolonged state of hostilities between the Persian and Babylonian Empires during the second decade of Cyrus' reign. The Babylonians may have prevailed in certain engagements, for the Verse Account of Nabonidus, a lengthy paean composed by the Marduk priesthood in Cyrus' honor, states that the Babylonian king claimed great victories against the Persians.⁴⁹ Still, there could be no doubt as to the direction in which things were trending in 540 BCE, when Babylonia was very much on the defensive.

Persian and Babylonian Propaganda

That the Persians and Babylonians waged an unforgiving war of propaganda against each other during the buildup to Cyrus' invasion in 540 BCE is apparent from the Verse Account. The first part of this important text recounts popular poems that were in circulation before the Persian conquest of Babylonia.⁵⁰ These verses debase the Babylonian king as a wicked tyrant and vile blasphemer, who falsely claimed sublime knowledge: "He would stand in the assembly, exalt himself; 'I am wise; I am knowledgeable; I have seen hidden things. A tablet made with a cut reed [stylus] I do not know how to read, but I have seen hidden things.'" ⁵¹ Nabonidus' hollow pretensions contrast sharply with the formidable figure of Cyrus, who appears in this and other Babylonian inscriptions

as Marduk's beloved, a "destroyer of foolishness," and a deliverer of the oppressed.⁵²

Cyrus' agents also made promises of reparations to the sizable community of Jewish exiles living in Babylonia. The unnamed prophet known as Second Isaiah openly encouraged his followers to support Cyrus in order to hasten their restoration to Israel.¶ Like other hopeful Jews, the anonymous prophet once envisioned Babylon's fall to be a bloody affair.** In lurid detail, he sang of the day when the Persians would make slave-girls out of Babylon's maidens:

Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, Daughter of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate.

Take millstones and grind flour; take off your veil. Lift up your skirts, bare your legs, and wade through the streams.

Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one.⁵³

But the prophet would eventually change his tune, because Cyrus did not want the Babylonians to view him as an enemy. In another hymn, the prophet captures better the intended message. Although indomitable in battle, Cyrus, the "one from the north," the "one from the east," appears as the paragon of justice. He will bring peace to the land and right the wrongs of the Babylonian kings as a champion of the meek, as the following three songs demonstrate:

"Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment.

Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands over nations to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow.

He pursues them and moves unscathed, his feet scarcely

touching the road.

Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord – with the first of them and with the last – I am he.”

The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble.⁵⁴



“I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes – one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay.

Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, ‘He was right?’”⁵⁵



“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.”

This is what God the Lord says – he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”⁵⁶

Xenophon, too, seems to have heard of Cyrus’ message of peace. According to the author of the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus sent envoys to Babylon to declare that in the event of war he would not harm any

Babylonian peasants, as long as Nabonidus agreed to spare non-combatants who willingly transferred their allegiance to Cyrus.⁵⁷ It was perhaps on the heels of such an agreement that the pro-Persian party scored an important victory in the south: the Iranian Bagiazu was named royal commissioner of Eanna, the powerful temple of Ishtar in Uruk.⁵⁸ A nightmarish situation thus unfolded before Nabonidus' eyes. His enemy's name was on everyone's lips.

The Persian Advance and the Captivity of the Gods

In the winter of 540–539 BCE, Cyrus finally made his move. A damaged line in the Babylonian Chronicle mentions a Persian assault led by one of Cyrus' generals into southern Mesopotamia in late February or early March, before the start of the campaign season.⁵⁹ By mid-spring, Cyrus and the main Persian column had entered northern Mesopotamia. Herodotus describes Cyrus' army as advancing with the pomp and ceremony of a parade regiment. Specifically, the historian mentions the army containing a team of 360 white horses, sacred to Mithra, and a long train of four-wheeled mule wagons that carried jugs of boiled water from the River Choaspes, the only stream pure enough to succor the king.⁶⁰ Here we have evidence of the early institutionalization of royal military practices, which became amplified over time. Both Cyrus and the commanders of the Persian forces in the south moved slowly, the latter waiting several months to capitalize upon their victory near Uruk.⁶¹

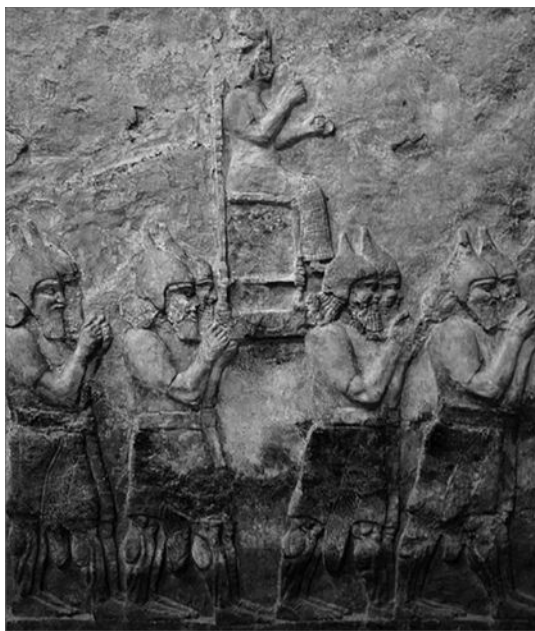
Herodotus offers a fanciful explanation for Cyrus' delay. According to him, the Persian army had arrived at the banks of the Gyndes River (presumably the modern Diyala), a tributary of the Tigris that could only be crossed by boat, when one of Cyrus' sacred white horses impetuously tried to swim across the stream. The beast plunged into the water and for a while struggled against the current but was eventually swept away and drowned.⁶² The scene moved Cyrus' men and enraged the king, who vowed "to break [the river's] strength that in future even women should cross it easily without wetting their knees."⁶³ He accordingly postponed his attack on Babylon, divided his army into two parts, and dug 360 trenches to shallow the Gyndes. Cyrus thus "had his vengeance on the river, but not without losing the whole summer season."[†] This act is usually explained in terms of royal hubris or an effort to raise morale among soldiers who ostensibly viewed the horse's death as an evil omen.

However, the archaeological record confirms the shallowing of the stream during the Persian invasion, perhaps in connection with a major agricultural rehabilitation program. Irrigation problems in the Diyala region had caused a steady decline in the number of settlements since the second millennium BCE. But the area experienced a revival during the early years of the Persian occupation, as the number and size of settlements increased. George Cameron has interpreted the archaeological data as proof that Cyrus, almost immediately upon entering Babylonia, began performing reconstructive work "that would bring untold benefit to the land itself."⁶⁴

Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that Cyrus

would have put his soldiers to agricultural work unless he had good strategic reasons for biding his time. In all likelihood he had delayed the advance to negotiate the terms for the surrender of the fortified cities north of the Median Wall.⁶⁵

Faced with the very real prospect that his cities would open their gates to the conqueror, Nabonidus settled upon a drastic policy. He decided to hold hostage the sacred idols of Babylonia's outlying cities to ensure the loyalty of their inhabitants.[‡] So when Cyrus and his army resumed their march in the late summer of 539 BCE, a series of caravans laden with divine images and other religious artifacts made its way to Babylon. Living today, we can hardly grasp the full psychological impact of Nabonidus' action.⁶⁶ The idol was the centerpiece of the ancient Mesopotamian cult and the most important symbol of the community. The inanimate statues were treated like royalty, bathed, perfumed, groomed, and even fed lavish meals by an entourage of domestic servants, priests, and personal attendants.⁶⁷ Ancient Mesopotamian cults were geographically centralized, and the gods' powers territorially limited. That is why Cyrus could not receive the divine approval he desired with the gods concentrated in Babylon.



Stone relief showing Assyrian soldiers taking the statue of an enemy god into captivity. The Assyrians and Babylonians routinely held divine icons “hostage” to ensure the loyalty of their subjects.

But Nabonidus was playing a dangerous game by emptying his cities of their idols. Proximity to the cult statue meant everything to the superstitious masses, who believed that the sacred images of their gods could perform miracles, cure illness, and, most importantly, protect their settlements.⁶⁸ Cities lost divine protection when their gods left. Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin have cited an episode from the career of Alexander the Great to exemplify the hysteria that a deity's departure could cause.⁶⁹ While Alexander was besieging the Phoenician city of Tyre, one of its inhabitants dreamt that the god Resheph, whom the Greeks called Apollo, was preparing to abandon the city. The terrified inhabitants promptly entered the god's temple and secured the idol to the ground with golden chains – all

the while having to deal with Alexander's vicious assault. Thus, although Nabonidus believed that by relocating the idols from the peripheral cities to the imperial capital he was preventing Cyrus from using them to his own advantage, the displacement of the gods may have had the undesirable effect of actually sapping the spirit of a nation already low on morale. The Cyrus Cylinder certainly indicates that this was the case, for it refers to the worshippers of the removed idols as if they were "dead" or "like corpses" due to the absence of their gods.⁷⁰

Where was the Babylonian army during all this? We should begin by stating that Cyrus had launched his invasion when the Babylonian military was at its weakest. A major division of the Babylonian military had occurred in 553 BCE, just before Nabonidus' great expedition to Tema.⁷¹ On that occasion, Nabonidus had taken control of the kingdom's standing army, leaving behind only the tribal levies to support Belshazzar at home. The consequences of this division were severe. Albeit amazing, Nabonidus' Arabian conquests had come at a heavy cost for the standing army, which consisted of a fine core of heavily armed Mesopotamian troops supplemented by mercenaries, including, perhaps, some Greek hoplites.⁷² The newly captured cities had to be garrisoned, thus depleting the manpower available for the defense against Persia; meanwhile the unprecedented march to the Hijaz had exhausted Nabonidus' men and perhaps also the funds necessary to maintain the standing army in running order.⁷³ Back home, the situation was appreciably worse. The army that Belshazzar had commanded during his father's absence had received the unenviable task of quelling local insurrections, and

modern history has shown the traumatizing effect that police actions against kinsmen and co-nationalists can have on soldiers.⁷⁴ Cyrus thus could not have timed his attack any better. The Babylonian army was short on men, and its leaders lacked charisma. It is no surprise, then, that Belshazzar and Nabonidus picked their battles conservatively. A senseless defeat along the empire's frontiers and the entire core might collapse. Everything depended upon Nabuchadnezzar's interior defenses: the Median Wall and the waterworks guarding the approach to Babylon. The Median Wall extended from the Tigris to the Euphrates between two powerful strongholds: Opis and Sippar. With the likely exception of a force just large enough to keep the Persians at bay in the south, where less formidable defenses connected Uruk to Borsippa, the bulk of the Babylonian army defended this "Maginot" line.⁷⁵

Scholars have long attempted to reconcile the Chronicle's account of Babylon's fall with the information in the classical sources. The Chronicle mentions a peaceful conquest, whereas Herodotus, Xenophon, and Berossus speak of a lengthy siege and battle fought before Babylon's walls.⁷⁶ Sidney Smith's ingenious solution to this dilemma holds that the Greeks failed to distinguish between the *al Babili* and the *Babili KI* of the Akkadian sources, that is, between "Babylon the City" and "Babylon the Country," or "Babylonia."⁷⁷ The classical accounts of the battle outside "Babylon's walls" thus refer to the engagement that the Chronicle states was fought beyond the fortifications protecting Babylonia – that is, beyond the Median Wall: "In the month of Tashritu [September–October], when Cyrus did battle at Opis on [the bank of the Tigris] against the army of Akkad,

the Akkadians retreated.”⁷⁸

The confusion in the sources further explains the classical accounts of what happened next. According to Herodotus, the Babylonians withdrew behind their fortifications across the Euphrates and prepared for a lengthy siege; they were thwarted, however, when the Persians secretly diverted the river into an artificial lake and waded into the “city.”⁷⁹ Herodotus recounts how “the Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of their city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on and they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until they learned the news the hard way.”⁸⁰ Xenophon’s account is very similar, except that it omits the name of the river that Cyrus shallowed.⁸¹ The omission perhaps underscores the uncertainty regarding the identity of the river, because, as Smith notes, the drainable river is not the Euphrates in the vicinity of Babylon but the Tigris at Opis, and that is because of the Aqarquf Depression.⁸² So Cyrus performed another great engineering feat to cut behind Nabonidus’ defenses.

That the breach of the Median Wall quickly led to Babylon’s capture is also true. The Chronicle shows that all resistance stopped once matters at Opis were settled. But how were they settled? The relevant line is difficult to read and is subject to widely divergent translations. One reading provides that, after the Babylonian army retreated, Cyrus “carried off the plunder and slaughtered the people [of Opis].”⁸³ Another states that Cyrus “burned the people of Akkad [Opis’ inhabitants] with fire.”⁸⁴ These readings imply frightful acts of violence against unarmed civilians and seem wholly out of character for the Persian

conqueror. Other interpretations accord better with Cyrus' reputed disdain for wanton bloodshed. One such reading recounts only the ransacking of the Babylonian camp: "He [Cyrus] took plunder and defeated the soldiers of Akkad."⁸⁵ Another relates a popular Babylonian uprising against Nabonidus: "the people of Akkad revolted, but he [Nabonidus] massacred the confused inhabitants."⁸⁶ In deciding which reading makes the most sense we must rely on reason. Would Cyrus have risked an unnecessary atrocity at Opis that could have galvanized a divided nation and convinced the inhabitants of Babylon, the strongest city on earth, that they would be better off enduring a siege than admitting the Persian army through their gates? And if Cyrus was unopposed to ruthless acts of violence, why did his propagandists make such an effort to present him as a humanitarian conqueror in the Cyrus Cylinder and other texts? Cyrus would have been mendacious indeed if he boasted of a bloodless entry into Babylon only weeks after perpetrating a wholesale massacre at Opis, less than sixty miles away.

A Glorious Conquest

The victory at Opis and the crossing of the Tigris marked the effective end of the war. Sippar, the other great defensive bastion in the north, fell without a struggle only days after the battle at Opis on the fourteenth of Tashritu (October 10, 539 BCE).⁸ Whether Belshazzar, Nabonidus, or both had commanded the Babylonian army at Opis is unknown, but Nabonidus was in Sippar just before it capitulated.

The Chronicle relates that “he fled,” and Berossus tells us that he escaped toward Borsippa, just south of Babylon. That Nabonidus harbored no hopes of defending his capital indicates that a sizable Persian force, or perhaps Arab tribesmen who had sided with Persia, blocked the king’s path to the west.⁸⁷ Two days after Cyrus seized Sippar, “on the sixteenth day [October 12, 539 BCE], Ugbaru [Oebaras], governor of Gutium [Media], and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle.”⁸⁸ Cyrus had apparently divided his forces immediately after the fight at Opis, sending Oebaras straight for the enemy capital while he himself marched to Sippar. Meanwhile, a large Persian army must have still lurked in the south. With his entry to Borsippa blocked by this force, Nabonidus returned to Babylon and gave himself up.

Belshazzar had already perished, although the manner of his death remains unclear. Both the Bible and the *Cyropaedia* claim that he died on the night of Babylon’s fall. According to the Book of Daniel, Belshazzar was busy feasting in Nabuchadnezzar’s palace, when the fingers of a human hand appeared out of thin air and wrote on the plaster of the wall behind him.⁸⁹ The frightened prince summoned his diviners to interpret the mysterious inscription, but only the prophet Daniel was successful. The inscription read *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* and meant the following:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Upharsin: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.⁹⁰

“That very night,” says the Book, “Belshazzar king of the Babylonians was slain and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom . . . ”⁹¹ Here, as in other passages in the Book of Daniel, the deeds of Cyrus have been attributed to the apocryphal “Darius the Mede.”⁹²

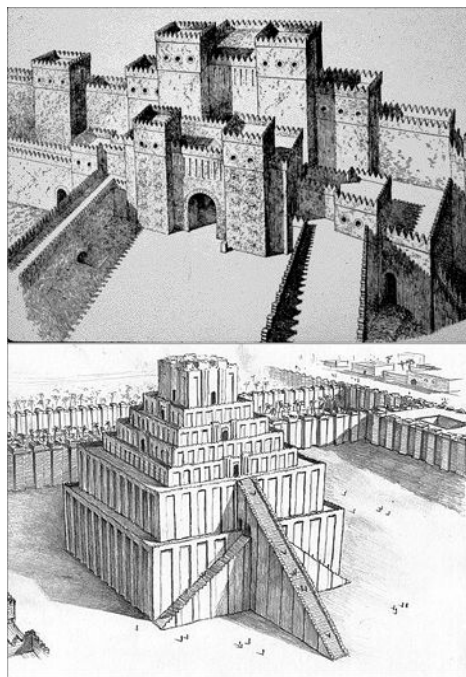
A slightly varied account of Babylon’s fall is given by Xenophon. According to the *Cyropaedia*, the second King of Assyria, who is usually equated with Belshazzar, was celebrating “a certain festival . . . during which all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.”⁹³ A company of Persians led by Gobryas and Gatas, another Babylonian traitor who had perchance acquired an Iranian name, entered the city and made for the palace disguised as revelers.⁹⁴ Once inside, the Persians killed Belshazzar in the throne room of his palace. The two stories are hardly inconsonant, although certain details are clearly embellished. The key feature in each is the celebration, which appears also in Herodotus’ narrative. Historians dispute its truth, but a strong case exists for its historicity.⁹⁵ Babylon surrendered on the sixteenth of Tashritu, which in the Babylonian lunar calendar follows either the so-called Harvest Moon or, if additional days have been added to align the lunar calendar with the solar one, the Hunter’s Moon.¶ These are “the only times during the year when the moon for several days rises right after sunset and shines through the night.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, due to a trick of the eye, the orb of the moon seems larger and more luminous during these nights.** As such, the evenings in question were sacred to Sin, and ample evidence shows that in Harran and elsewhere the moon god’s devotees celebrated a special Akitu in his honor around the

seventeenth of Tashritu, the date when “Sin is propitious to mankind.”⁹⁷ Whether Belshazzar and his followers were actually engaged in revelry when Babylon fell is doubtful, although stranger things have happened. But it is not unlikely that Nabonidus had prepared for the celebration in advance, or that his followers in Babylon kept vigil on the night of the sixteenth so that their god might deliver them from danger (one may even fancy that Marduk’s priests opened the city’s gates in the middle of the night to make Sin appear powerless).⁹⁸

Passing over Belshazzar’s fate, the Chronicle proceeds with the details of Oebaras’ occupation: “Until the end of the month, the shield-carrying troops of Gutium surrounded the gates of Esagila, but there was no interruption of rites of any kind in the Esagila or in any other temple and no festival date was missed.”⁹⁹ So for two weeks, Oebaras’ Medes guarded the entrance to Marduk’s temple, and religious life went on as usual in the great city. The care taken to safeguard Esagila and Babylon’s other temples may reflect more than standard peacekeeping measures, however, as Marduk’s priests, whose complicity with Cyrus must have been widely known, may have suffered actual reprisals at the hands of Nabonidus’ followers during the city’s last days.

“On the third day of the month Arahsamnu [October 29], Cyrus entered Babylon. They filled the anointing vessels in his presence. Peace was imposed on the city.”¹⁰⁰ It is interesting that Cyrus waited seventeen days to make his appearance. A number of scholars have interpreted this, and the statement that “peace was imposed on the city,” as proof that Cyrus allowed his army adequate time to pillage the

Babylonian capital.¹⁰¹ But such a reading presses the text unduly. The Chronicle is not shy about reporting the taking of plunder (it elsewhere mentions Cyrus' removal of Ecbatana's treasures and, possibly, the pillaging of the enemy camp at Opis). Perhaps, Cyrus wanted to wait to ensure that representatives from all the nations formerly subject to Nabonidus would be present to swear allegiance to him in Babylon. The Cyrus Cylinder provides that Syrian princes and tent-dwelling Arabs paid homage to Cyrus in Nabuchadrezzar's palace, and the orchestration of the triumphal procession described below would have taken time.¹⁰²



Above left: The Ishtar Gate. *Above right:* Etemenanki, or the Tower of Babel.

In Babylon, Cyrus saw a city unlike any other in the world. Eight bronze gates, each the terminus of a major street or avenue, pierced the city's outer

walls.¹⁰³ Cyrus' victory parade moved along the Processional Way, ironically known as the *Aibur-shabu*, "The Enemy Shall Never Pass." Paved with limestone, it was the same street that the gods traveled during the Akitu festival. Two high walls, stamped with the images of 120 lions, Ishtar's sacred animal, enclosed its sides. According to one reading of the Chronicle, Babylon's inhabitants lined the streets for Cyrus' arrival, scattering twigs and flowers to smooth the approach of his chariot.¹⁰⁴ The Processional Way entered Babylon's inner city through the famous Ishtar Gate, one of Nabuchadnezzar's magnificent structures and the most important monument from the ancient city to survive. It measured some 75 feet tall and was made of dark-blue glazed bricks. Colossal bulls and dragons, symbols of the gods Adad and Marduk, guarded its approaches, while bas-reliefs depicting the same creatures covered its façade. From the Ishtar Gate, the Processional Way passed by Nabuchadnezzar's palace and the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The gardens were arranged along the rooftops of multiple ascending buildings and watered through an intricate system of hidden vaults and hydraulic lifts connected to the nearby Euphrates.¹⁰⁵ Legend has it that Nabuchadnezzar had fashioned the gardens to remind his homesick Median wife of her mountainous homeland in northwestern Iran.

But it was not the Hanging Gardens that dominated Cyrus' sight. Babylon's most impressive monument was the Tower of Babel, or Etemenanki, "the house that is the foundation between heaven and earth." Dedicated to Marduk, this ziggurat had been

built, destroyed, and rebuilt several times since Babylon's First Dynasty (1830–1531 BCE). Nabopolassar and Nabuchadnezzar had established it in the form Cyrus saw. Its dimensions were breathtaking: approximately 300 feet on each side and 305 feet tall. Aside from Egypt's Great Pyramids, it was the tallest building in the world and a wonder to behold. The Jews attributed its construction to the mythical king Nimrod, who desired a platform from which to challenge God in heaven.¹⁰⁶ Herodotus describes it as follows:

In the one [division of Babylon's inner city] stood the palace of the kings, surrounded by a wall of great strength and size: in the other was the sacred precinct of Zeus Belus [Marduk], a square enclosure . . . with gates of solid brass; which was also remaining in my time. In the middle of the precinct there was a tower of solid masonry . . . upon which was raised a second tower, and on that a third, and so on up to eight. The ascent to the top is on the outside, by a path which winds round all the towers. When one is about half-way up, one finds a resting-place and seats, where persons are wont to sit some time on their way to the summit. On the topmost tower there is a spacious temple, and inside the temple stands a couch of unusual size, richly adorned, with a golden table by its side. There is no statue of any kind set up in the place, nor is the chamber occupied in the night by any one but a single native woman, who as . . . the priests of this god affirm, is chosen . . . by the deity out of all the women of the land.¹⁰⁷

Just south of the Tower lay Esagila, the house of Marduk, where Cyrus presumably received the Babylonian crown. The Chronicle mentions the filling of “anointing vessels” (literally, “reeds”) in Cyrus’ presence. The critical moment in the Babylonian coronation ceremony involved the pouring of oil upon the king’s brow – a rite rooted in a primitive fertility cult. Jewish kings were similarly anointed, but other aspects of Babylonian royal protocol were unique to

Babylon. Tradition required the new king to enter the inner cella of Esagila and make obeisance before a colossal statue of an enthroned Marduk. According to Herodotus, the entire ensemble – statue, throne, and platform – was made of solid gold and weighed over 22 tons. Across the way, in a vast antechamber scented with frankincense and adorned with gilded walls that “shined like the sun,” stood the statue of the royal genius, over 18 feet tall and also made of gold.¹⁰⁸ As his own inscriptions provide, Cyrus bowed before Marduk’s godhead in accordance with ancient ritual. Having paid his respects to Marduk, the conqueror emerged from Esagila as the legitimate king of Babylon.

At this juncture, the sources tell us, Cyrus addressed the Babylonian people.¹⁰⁹ Properly speaking, he did not utter any words himself. Rather, he stood silent – perhaps on the balcony of Nabuchadrezzar’s palace, perhaps the platform of the Tower of Babel – while an official, presumably Gobryas, read aloud an edict announcing Cyrus’ genealogy and the principles on which he planned to rule. Public addresses of this sort were an Iranian custom; Mesopotamian rulers dealt only with the highest echelons of society upon ascending the throne.¹¹⁰ At the conclusion of the address, the multitudes who had gathered to catch a glimpse of the famous conqueror fell prostrate to the ground.

Gazing at the spectacle from the balcony of the palace or the heights of Etemenanki, Cyrus may have reflected upon his life. No epic hero had matched what he had achieved in the short span of eleven years. During that time, he had raised his people to the pinnacle of power and had given them mastery

over civilizations far older and more technologically advanced than their own. He had, furthermore, accomplished all this without indulging in the same violence as the ancient kings whose ruined monuments lay scattered across his empire. But time kept moving. No longer the impetuous youth writhing under Astyages' thumb, Cyrus had to think of the future and what might pass after he died. To his right stood the twenty-year-old Cambyses, present alongside his father perhaps for the first time during an important state occasion.¹¹¹ He would have to be trained to sustain the empire. And then there were the people. Cyrus must have marveled at the amazing diversity of the masses gathered before him. Babylon was the greatest cosmopolitan center in the world. Besides the native population, large numbers of Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Arabs, Armenians, Iranians, and Elamites lived in its confines. Cyrus had seen all these peoples before, to be sure, but never so many together in the same place. Babylon thus represented the perfect microcosm of his empire, and much work was needed to ensure that this empire did not collapse under the weight of its own diversity, as had Babylon.

With this in mind, Cyrus summoned into his presence the princes, governors, and chieftains of Syria, the Levant, and northern Arabia – all the lands that had formerly recognized Babylonian hegemony. Gobryas reappointed some of these dignitaries to their old offices, while replacing others, hence the Chronicle: “Gubaru, his governor, installed sub-governors in Babylon.”¹¹² Persian rule was thus extended, at least nominally, to the frontiers of Egypt, Arabian Dedan, and the Red Sea.¹¹³ The most

important new territory was Phoenicia. A nation of mariners, the Phoenicians possessed the best fleet in the world and engaged in trade with settlements as far off as Spain's Atlantic Coast, the Azores, and even England. Like the Greeks, upon whose markets they infringed, the Phoenicians established colonies throughout the Mediterranean Sea. The greatest of these was Tunisian Carthage, which eventually became a first-rate power rivaling Rome. Phoenicia's overseas colonies had been independent of Babylonia and, therefore, did not submit to Persian rule. However, the submission of the principal city-states of the Phoenician mainland (Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, Aradus, and Joppa) helped make Persia a maritime power, capable of bringing under its sway Cyprus, itself an important part of the Phoenician world.

A common appeal that Cyrus must have heard from Babylonia's former subjects, including the people of Syria and the Levant, concerned the restoration of the temples despoiled by the Chaldean kings. Cyrus, who already had decreed the return of the sacred images that Nabonidus had displaced during the last months of the war, issued a similar proclamation concerning the holy icons of the subject nations. He even ordered the reconstruction of temples and shrines that the Babylonians had destroyed, as well as the restoration of exiled populations to their homelands. Thus, the Chronicle states: "From the month of Kislimu [November–December 539 BCE] to the month of Addaru [February–March 538 BCE], the gods of Akkad, which Nabonidus had made come down to Babylon, were returned to their sacred cities."¹¹⁴ And the Cyrus Cylinder: "From Shuanna [Babylon] to Ashur and from Susa, Akkad, Eshnunna,

Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der, as far as the region of Gutium, I returned the images of the gods, whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, to the sacred centers on the other side of the Tigris, and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their homes. In addition, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I settled in their habitations, in pleasing abodes, the gods of Sumer and Akkad, whom Nabonidus, to the anger of the lord of the gods, had brought into Babylon.”¹¹⁵

Within Babylon itself, Cyrus restored certain dilapidated fortifications that Nabuchadnezzar and his father, Nabopolassar, had built. The work was symbolic, as conquered cities traditionally were not permitted to maintain defensive walls, and the Verse Account reports that Cyrus himself “took up hoe, spade, and earth basket” to impress the natives with his dedication to the task.¹¹⁶



The Mesopotamians believed that a good king must build or repair temples. In inscriptions from Uruk, Cyrus describes himself as the “lover” and “rebuilder” of Esagila and Ezida. The Assyrian king depicted here carries a basket of bricks for a temple construction ritual. In the Verse Account, Cyrus claims to have performed this ritual at Babylon.

Cyrus’ actions underscore his empathy, a quality that must have made his stay in Babylon particularly heartbreaking, for hardly had the plans for restoration been formed that tragedy struck. The Chronicle reports that on the night of the eleventh of Arahsamnu (November 6, 539 BCE), eight days after Cyrus had entered Babylon, Oebaras died, perhaps from a stroke. His passing deprived Cyrus of one of his most

important and faithful officers, not to mention a lifelong friend. If the great conqueror did not weep for Oebaras' death, he most certainly did for that of his wife, Cassandane, who perished a few months later. The Chronicle reads: "From the twenty-seventh day of Addaru till the third day of Nisannu [March 20–26, 538 BCE], there was an official mourning period in Akkad. All the people went around with their hair disheveled."¹¹⁷ Herodotus, who had heard of Cyrus' deep love for Cassandane, provides that the Persian conqueror ordered all his subjects to observe a great mourning for her death.¹¹⁸ Whether Cassandane was entombed at Pasargadae in the tower now called the Zendan-e Soleiman, or "Prison of Solomon," as has been conjectured, is unclear.¹¹⁹ But her death seems to have prompted Cyrus' return to Iran, for on the fourth of Nisannu (March 27, 538 BCE), the day of Marduk's Akitu, Cambyses, and not Cyrus, was crowned King of Babylon.¹²⁰ Cyrus clearly did not intend to remain in Babylon much longer.

The Chronicle describes Cambyses' investiture in some detail.[†] Special attention seems to have been paid to his entering the shrine of Nabu dressed in Elamite robes and armed with a quiver full of arrows. This curious reference has spurred speculation that Cambyses somehow offended the god's priests by failing to observe proper protocol.¹²¹ Although such belief may be unwarranted, the evidence shows that Cyrus allowed Cambyses to rule as "King of Babylon" for only nine months. From the end of 538 BCE to 530 BCE, Cyrus kept the title to himself, attaching to it the loftier designations "Great King" and "King of the Lands," which he had never relinquished. The young prince may have been unprepared.

But Gobryas was ready, and in him Cyrus kept faith. Working closely with Nabonidus' chief administrator (Akkadian *shakin mati*) Nabu-ahhe-bullit, and many other members of the toppled regime, Gobryas governed all the former Babylonian territories.¹²² His directive was clear: preserve local administrative practices, keep the natives happy, and collect tribute. This the satrap faithfully accomplished. Texts dated to his governorship show the Persians adorning native temples, adjudicating cases in accordance with Babylonian law, and contributing soldiers to protect local shepherds where no such arrangement had previously existed.¹²³ During his office, the standard penal clauses of business contracts were revised to relegate violators to "the punishment of Gubaru, governor of Babylonia and Across the River."¹²⁴ The new language replaced the traditional invocation of "the punishment of (the gods and) the king."¹²⁵ Cyrus seems to have given Gobryas considerable leeway in administering his satrapy, such that some scholars consider Gobryas to have ruled almost as a vassal king.¹²⁶

In due time, Cambyses returned to the scene (535 BCE), ostensibly to govern northern Mesopotamia under Gobryas' watchful eye.¹²⁷ It is telling that Gobryas oversaw construction in Cyrus' name at the great sanctuaries of Esagila, Ezida (Nabu's shrine at Borsippa), and Eanna, as well as at the moon god's temple in Ur (where Nabonidus had made his daughter the high priestess). The Verse Account provides that Cyrus systematically destroyed certain religious monuments built by the previous regime, and such desecrations would have been in line with Cyrus' self-presentation as a champion of the traditional

religion. But it is clear that neither Cyrus nor Gobryas permitted full-fledged retaliations against Nabonidus' followers.¹²⁸ Furthermore, it was up to Gobryas to ensure that the Persians kept their side of the bargain in return for the cooperation of the local elites who had paved the way for their conquest, while bringing into the fold those who had been less supportive. All in all, the elderly satrap can be judged to have served his country well by saving Marduk's cult and easing the political transition.

As for Nabonidus, he may have cracked a bitter smile when he heard of the new cylinder inscription that Cyrus had deposited at Etemennigur, the temple of the moon god in Ur: "Sin, the light of heaven and earth, with his favorable omens gave into my hands the four corners of the earth. I brought the gods back into their sanctuaries."¹²⁹ Cyrus had spared the unlucky ruler, as was his policy, and had given him an estate in Carmania that, according to Berossus, Darius later limited.¹³⁰ Ibbi-Sin, the last god-king of Sumer and Akkad, had endured a similar princely exile nearly two thousand years before, when the men of Anshan and Susa conquered Babylon in 2285 BCE.¹³¹ He, too, had been a devotee of Sin, and as one well read in history, Nabonidus may have grasped the irony.

** Mylitta represents the Greek rendering of Akkadian *Bel-it*, or "Lady," an epithet of Ishtar.

† Regarding the Akitu festival as an affirmation of Babylon's status as the chief city of the empire, it is important to understand that the Babylonian pantheon had evolved in parallel with the political unification of the country. Since time immemorial, each Babylonian city had possessed its own patron deity, which joined the ranks of gods from other urban centers included within the same political formation. Furthermore, within the national pantheon, the hierarchy of divinities reflected that of the nation's cities. Thus, the empire of

Sargon of Akkad, the first prince to unify Babylonia, had as its principal cities Akkad, Uruk, and Nippur, and as its principal deities Ishtar of Akkad, Anu of Uruk, and Enlil of Nippur. The formative structuring of the Babylonian pantheon occurred during the reign of Nabuchadnezzar I (reigned 1126–1105 b.c.), who made Babylon his capital and Marduk, Babylon's divine patron, the undisputed chief of the national pantheon.

‡ See page 30.

§ See pages 207–208.

¶ Second Isaiah is also known as Pseudo- or Deutero-Isaiah.

** For possible prophecies about Cyrus in the Book of Daniel, see Appendix XII.

† The story, which Xenophon also reports, recalls the more famous tale of Xerxes scourging the Hellespont in 480 BCE. Xerxes had the Hellespont punished following a storm that destroyed the pontoon bridge that his engineers had constructed for the movement of his army from Asia into Europe. According to Herodotus (7.35), the Persian king “gave orders that the Hellespont should receive three hundred lashes and have a pair of fetters thrown into it.” It was also reported that Xerxes had the Hellespont branded with hot irons and verbally denigrated for being a “salt and bitter current.” Herodotus offers the story of the Hellespont's chastisement as an example of Xerxes' arrogance and quickness to anger. Certain modern scholars have attempted to explain Xerxes' actions in terms of the Zoroastrian doctrine that, as opposed to fresh water, salt water is impure; see, for example, Boyce (1982), 166. In my opinion, Xerxes acted in a calculated manner in order to impress upon his soldiers – particularly, his foreign levies – that his power exceeded that of the Hellespont, or whatever divinity resided in its waters. Assuming the story of the white horse at the Gyndes to be true, a similar motive may be attributed to Cyrus. According to Herzfeld (1947), 466, the legend of the Gyndes being punished continued to be told in northern Iraq until the early twentieth century.

‡ Nabonidus had perhaps implemented this policy before. The Cyrus Cylinder mentions the restoration of idols from Susa, Ashur, and Nineveh, and it is very likely that Cyrus had deprived Nabonidus of control over one or more of these cities before 540 BCE.

§ On the accuracy of this and other Julio-Claudian calendar dates ascribed to the events documented in the Babylonian Chronicle, see the first footnote on page 208.

¶ Note that the traditional date given for Babylon's fall in the Julio-Claudian calendar – October 12 – does not assume an intercalary month. October 12 follows the Harvest Moon, not the Hunter's Moon.

** These effects are due to the seasonal tilt of the earth, which causes

the Harvest and Hunter's Moons to appear lower in the sky. The same conditions also give the Harvest and Hunter's Moons a reddish hue.

† An interesting question involves the extent to which Cambyses submitted himself to the ritualistic humiliation that constituted such an important part of the Akitu. The matter is obscure, because the relevant portion of the Babylonian Chronicle is illegible. However, tradition required the king to enter Esagila on the fifth day of the festival and surrender his crown and other royal insignia to the high priest of Marduk. The priest would respond to this gesture by smacking the king across the face and forcing him to his knees before the god's statue. After hearing the king's confession, the priest would issue the divine mandate: destroy Marduk's enemies and defeat his foes. The priest would then reinvest the monarch, but not before striking him again, this time with enough force to make tears well in his eyes, as atonement for any past sins. Marduk's priests had to handle these aspects of the ritual carefully with respect to their new Persian overlords. We may be sure that no priest dared lift his hand against Cyrus' son, much less deliver him a blow. Yet the insistence upon ritualistic propriety must have made it difficult for the priests or the Persians to deviate too greatly from the standard form of the ritual.

The Lord's Anointed: Cyrus and Israel

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, the God of Heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.

—2 Chronicles

Nabuchadnezzar, the greatest ruler of the Babylonian Empire that Cyrus conquered, was, among other things, an excellent general. His own father, Nabopolassar, having recognized this trait in the son, entrusted Nabuchadnezzar with the vital task of driving the Egyptians out of Asia between 609 BCE and 605 BCE. During those years, Nabuchadnezzar caught his first glimpse of Jerusalem, a city of critical political and ideological importance today, but in those days just one of many fortified settlements near the Egyptian frontier. Because Pharaoh Necho II had slain Josiah, king of Judah, at the Battle of Megiddo in

609 BCE, Jerusalem's inhabitants looked favorably upon Nabuchadrezzar's efforts.‡ His annihilation of the Egyptian army at Carchemish in 605 BCE prompted the prophet Jeremiah, that great prognosticator of world events, to proudly sing of the "Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel" punishing "Pharaoh and Egypt and her gods and her kings" by handing them over "to those who seek their life, to King Nabuchadrezzar of Babylon and his officers."¹ The Israelites continued to watch the following year as the army of the recently crowned Nabuchadrezzar drove south, crushing their age-old rivals, the Philistines, and other neighboring tribes. With Nabuchadrezzar eliminating Israel's enemies one by one, the decision to transfer to Babylonia the allegiance that Judah had previously owed Assyria and Egypt seemed easy. But Jehoiakim, son and successor of Josiah, was of a different mind, partly because Necho had raised him to the throne, partly because he resented public opinion that Nabuchadrezzar, and not he, was the true "Servant of the Lord." Jehoiakim burned the parchment on which Jeremiah had prophesied Jerusalem's fall in the event of a war with Babylon and declared that he would resist Nabuchadrezzar. His boasts were empty. The mere sight of the Babylonian army cowed him into submission, much to the pleasure of his subjects, who lacked the stomach for a fight. By 601 BCE, Nabuchadrezzar was ready to invade Egypt, but the Egyptians had spent the years since Carchemish bolstering their military and so defeated the Babylonian king in a bloody engagement near the Sinai desert.

This setback marked the end of the good relations between Nabuchadrezzar and the Jews. While the

Babylonian army regrouped in Mesopotamia, Egypt returned to Palestine. The ruler of a minor kingdom dependent upon its neighbors for survival, Jehoiakim quickly accepted Necho's overtures and revolted. He did so against the protests of Jeremiah, who foresaw the Babylonian king's devastation of Judah. In 598 BCE, Nabuchadnezzar once again led his troops into Palestine. The Egyptians promised help but never came, and the Babylonian army quickly overran Judah and besieged Jerusalem, which fell shortly thereafter. For whatever reason, Nabuchadnezzar, who had previously leveled Philistine Ascalon and other nearby cities, perhaps to prove a point to the Egyptians, spared Jerusalem. But he pillaged the Temple of Solomon and exiled to Babylon Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, who had inherited the throne following his father's death. Along with the monarch went approximately three thousand Jewish noblemen, including the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel.² Jehoiachin fared reasonably well in exile, as Nabuchadnezzar arranged for him to live under house arrest in a sizable manor subsidized by the royal court. But he would not be so lenient with Zedekiah, the twenty-one-year-old son of Josiah, whom Nabuchadnezzar installed as the new vassal king of Judah in 597 BCE.



Assyrian relief showing the inhabitants of a conquered city being led off into exile.

Zedekiah remained loyal for nine years before following in the footsteps of his predecessors and conspiring with the Egyptians against Babylonian interests. Judah rebelled in 588 BCE, and Nabuchadnezzar returned with a vengeance. During the ensuing eighteen-month siege, Jerusalem suffered a terrible famine and drank from the “Goblet of God’s wrath” to the dregs.³ When the city finally fell, it was thoroughly sacked; many of its people were killed, and the Temple of Solomon was reduced to rubble. Afterward, Nabuchadnezzar passed judgment over the captive royal family at Riblah. One by one, Zedekiah’s sons were slaughtered before their father. When Zedekiah exclaimed that he could no longer bear the sight, Nabuchadnezzar obliged him by burning out his eyes. Blind and shackled, the Judean king was hauled

away to Babylon together with some fifteen thousand other deportees (586 BCE). Five years later, in response to another insurrection, the Babylonians deported several thousand more Jews. Jerusalem was by now a smoldering ruin. Only a few thousand souls remained to inhabit the city. Mostly from the lower classes, this remnant lived on the brink of starvation. According to the Book of Lamentations, men and women regularly died of exhaustion in Jerusalem's empty streets, while starving parents cooked the bodies of their children for food.⁴ For many years, scholars doubted the Book's veracity, but archaeologists have shown that Nabuchadnezzar ravaged the Holy Land more viciously than any Assyrian king. The number of settlements he destroyed was astounding, the loss of life that accompanied his depredations enormous.⁵

So began one of the most difficult periods in the ancient history of the Jews. The term commonly applied to it, the "Babylonian Captivity," represents something of a misnomer, because the exiles were hardly captives. The Old Testament describes the exiles as having been free to move around within Babylonia and to communicate with their relatives back home. What made the Babylonian Captivity, or "Exile," so trying was the profound psychological impact of the displacement. Although he was never worshipped with idols, Yahweh, the God of Israel, was originally a tribal god, similar to the divine patron of a Babylonian town.⁶ His cult was highly localized and he himself but one of many deities. The Temple at Jerusalem represented his house, beyond which his authority did not far extend.⁷ The destruction of the Temple and the deportation of his worshippers thus

precipitated a major crisis of faith. Many Jews felt helpless outside Yahweh's presence. Others questioned his supremacy. If he was really the greatest god, then how could he have failed to defend his people against Nabuchadrezzar and the gods of Babylon? The exiles also had to deal with more mundane matters, such as preserving their culture while attempting to integrate into Babylonian society. Feelings of sorrow, humiliation, and rage abounded. Various groups coped with the trauma differently.⁸ Some rationalized the vicious turn of events as divine punishment for past sins ("Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven, and say, 'We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.'").⁹ Others gravitated toward the cults of the victorious Babylonian gods.¹⁰ Many simply seethed with revenge ("O daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.").¹¹ It was a dark time for a nation used to dark times.

However, the Exile also marked a critical turning point in the history of Western civilization. The trauma of displacement forced the previously insular Jewish religion to reinvent itself. Exposed to foreign influence and unable to reconcile their traditional beliefs with their current plight, the exiles seriously questioned the meaning of human life and man's relationship with the divine. Cyrus and the Persians arrived on the scene just as Jewish religious thinkers began to reconsider many of the key doctrines of their faith. Discourse with the Zoroastrian Persians contributed to the Jews redefining Yahweh as a more majestic, transcendental, and abstract deity that could not be confined, as it were, in a temple. It also led to

the belief that God rewards or punishes in the hereafter based on man's actions in this life. This notion, directly traceable to the period of Exile, lies at the core of Western ethics and religious thought, even today. In its totality, the new current of thinking revolutionized Judaism and laid the groundwork for the later world religions of Christianity and Islam, both of which hailed from the same Abrahamic tradition.

“He Is My Shepherd”

Cyrus first captured the attention of the Jews during his war against Croesus. Some may have heard his name before, perhaps as early as his years as crown prince of the Medes or, more likely, following his overthrow of Astyages. However, that victory, which to uninformed outsiders had all the makings of a protracted dynastic struggle, did not by itself alter the balance of power in the Near East. With the Persian conquest of Lydia, however, the Babylonian Empire suddenly found itself encircled on two fronts by a single, hostile state. Second Isaiah's earliest reference to Cyrus conveys the hope that the Persian conqueror would soon tighten this noose.

The works of Second Isaiah and other prophets of the Achaemenid period are important to any history of Cyrus or the Persian Empire, because they underscore what one fails to find in the Greek sources: the stark reality that, for many downtrodden nations, Persian rule represented a welcome reprieve from the tyrannies of the old empires.⁸ The spirit of change –

political, religious, and ideological – looms large in Second Isaiah’s psalms, which rank “among the most splendid political (as well as religious) poetry ever penned.”¹² Where they were composed remains a mystery; Palestine, Lebanon, Babylonia, and Egypt have all been advanced as possible locations. In all likelihood, the prophet moved back and forth between Jerusalem and Babylonia and maybe even spent time in Cyrus’ camp, where he obtained his “exceptional information about Persia.”¹³

Second Isaiah’s first passage about Cyrus, which we have reproduced in the previous chapter (see the first song on page 199), addresses certain “islands.”¹⁴ Some scholars have interpreted this term literally to mean the coastal cities of the Levant, whereas others have treated it as a reference to the scattered communities of Jews living within the Babylonian Empire or as a figurative expression signifying the ends of the earth. The mention of Cyrus pursuing his foes “unscathed,” with “feet scarcely touching the road,” alludes to his swift march through Lydia and capture of Sardis, which accomplishment Herodotus also noted.[¶] This allusion dates the passage to immediately after Sardis’ fall in 545 BCE.

Thereupon, Second Isaiah’s interest in Cyrus deepens. His next reference to Cyrus, also set forth in the last chapter (see the second song on page 199), concerns the conqueror’s return from the east (“the rising sun”), where he had brought ruler after ruler into submission, breaking their power like a “potter treading the clay.”¹⁵ At the end of the passage, Second Isaiah lambastes the pagan gods of Babylonia and Syria for lacking the courage to prophesize about Cyrus:

Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know,
Or beforehand so we could say, “He was right”?
No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any
words from you.¹⁶

Only Yahweh has the necessary clairvoyance, and motive, to announce Cyrus’ rise.¹⁷ So the prophet begins to tie Israel’s fortunes to Cyrus. This utterance probably dates between the years 544 BCE to 542 BCE.¹⁸

Cyrus’ bond with Israel grows stronger in the next reference, which begins with the prophet dispatching a herald to Jerusalem with news from the Lord. “The First to Zion: ‘Behold him, behold them. Now to Jerusalem I give a messenger with good tidings’”¹⁹ According to the Assyriologist Sidney Smith, Cyrus is the first unaccredited subject of the message, the useless idols of Babylonia and Syria the second.²⁰ The Persian king must have announced his intention to invade Babylonia by this time, for the rest of the passage focuses on promises of reparation:

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

“In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.”

This is what God the Lord says – he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”**

Near Eastern motifs fill this passage. Cyrus appears as the instrument of Yahweh’s design, the same role he assumes vis-à-vis Marduk in his Babylonian inscriptions. Yahweh chooses Cyrus and holds his hand just as Marduk grasps the hand of the legitimate king of Babylon during the Akitu festival.²¹ Meanwhile, the description of Yahweh “the Creator” recalls the numerous Old Persian inscriptions that hail Ahuramazda as the “great god . . . who created this earth, who created that sky, who created man, who created happiness for man.” The emphasis on justice is also suggestive of Iranian influence. Second Isaiah mentions Cyrus establishing order on earth and of the “islands” putting their faith in Cyrus’ law. In their inscriptions, the Persian kings frequently emphasize “setting the earth in its place” and “the law [that] held [the nations] firm.”²² The prophet must already have established contacts with the Persian camp when he composed this passage, for a personal guaranty from Cyrus seems to lurk behind the statement that the Persian king will not allow his troops to shout in the streets, break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smoldering wick upon occupying Babylon. At a glance, these lines indicate only that Cyrus will conquer peacefully and rule with mercy, but their true meaning runs deeper. As Sidney Smith has demonstrated, in ancient Mesopotamia, town criers communicated imperial edicts, such as those concerning corvée levies, by shouting in the streets; bruised reeds symbolized land ownership and were handed over from sellers to buyers to consummate property transactions, while candle-light represented

the rights of free men. Second Isaiah thus indicates that Cyrus will honor the Jews, restore them to Palestine, and preserve their personal freedom – all in contrast to the Babylonian kings. These actions make Cyrus the “light of the nations” and the vehicle through which Yahweh renews his Covenant with Israel.²³

Second Isaiah’s next few songs concern the fortunes of war. He alludes to pro-Persian uprisings in Syria, the Levant, and western Arabia, and to the Babylonian army evacuating Tema by land and sea, perhaps in response to a modest Persian cavalry force cutting off its supplies from the north.²⁴ With each Persian victory the prophet becomes more certain that the exiles will be restored to their homeland and the Temple will be rebuilt. He sings of Yahweh’s deliverance drawing near, the Lord forgiving Israel’s sins, and the value of offering military support to Cyrus, “the Lord’s arm.” Nabonidus’ edict requiring the transportation of all Babylonian cult statutes to the capital represents the ultimate victory against idolatry, always a sensitive topic for the Jews:

Bel bows down! Nabu stoops low! Their idols are borne by
beasts of burden.

The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden
for the weary.

They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the
burden, they themselves go off into captivity.²⁵

The Babylonian gods, the enemies of Yahweh, stand revealed as mere statues – inanimate lumps of stone, wood, and clay, the sheer weight of which impedes their escape. Their plight is juxtaposed to Yahweh’s majesty, made all the more real by Cyrus, who brings righteousness and salvation to the world:

Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels.
Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.
I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient
times, what is still to come.
I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a
man to fulfill my purpose.

What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have
planned, that will I do.

Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from
righteousness.

I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and
my salvation will not be delayed.

I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.[26](#)

When Cyrus, the “bird of prey” from the east,
finally takes Babylon, the prophet composes a paean
in his honor:

This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose
right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to
strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that
gates will not be shut:

“I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will
break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.

I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in
secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the
God of Israel, who summons you by name.

For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I
summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me.

I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no
God.

I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,
so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting,
men may know there is none besides me.

I am the Lord, and there is no other.

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and

Almost every line drips with meaning. The loosening of armor and opening of doors before Cyrus may simply reflect the removal of obstacles from the Persian conqueror's path. However, Mesopotamian custom was to punish rebel kings by forcing them to man the city gates while fettered in heavy suits of mail that restricted their movement and made them look “like squatting bears.”²⁸ Perhaps, Second Isaiah had witnessed the commanders of the Persian advance guard freeing the captive kings chained to Babylon's gates, in return for which they voluntarily opened the same gates to Cyrus, when he later made his triumphal entry.²⁹ The reference to “treasures of darkness” is probably likewise historical, as ancient Near Eastern kings often stored their riches in remote subterranean locations.³⁰ Nevertheless, the paean's most remarkable feature occurs at the beginning. The first line boldly declares Cyrus to be the “Lord's anointed,” or “Messiah” (Hebrew *Mashiah*). Although this term nowadays bears the eschatological meaning of “Savior” or “Deliverer,” it originally signified the legitimate king of Israel. Second Isaiah's affirmation is therefore striking, because the Jews believed that only a prince descended from the House of David could rule the Israelites as Yahweh's chosen deputy.³¹ By hailing Cyrus as the Messiah, Second Isaiah thus explicates his earlier prophecy about Cyrus and radically breaks with Jewish tradition. The mixed reaction to Cyrus' “anointment” may be adduced from the prophet's last song, that of the “Suffering Servant,” which some have interpreted as a reference to Second Isaiah's unjust imprisonment and imminent execution at the hands of fellow Jews outraged by his bestowal

of this sacred title upon a Gentile prince.³²

This interpretation of Second Isaiah's fate is hardly certain, however, and the anonymous prophet felt sufficiently confident in the wake of Babylon's fall to proclaim Persian authorization for the restoration of the exiles and the reconstruction of the Temple as if these potential actions were *faits accomplis*:

This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:

I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself . . . , who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be built," and of their ruins, "I will restore them,"

. . . who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"³³

Again, a personal communication from Cyrus may have inspired the prophet. The first century BCE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reports that Second Isaiah's songs were read aloud to Cyrus in Babylon and that the Persian king wept empathetically when he heard of Nabuchadrezzar's punishment of Jerusalem. If this tradition contains any truth, it may have been Second Isaiah himself who stood before Cyrus' throne.[†]

Regardless of whether the two men ever conversed, Cyrus lived up to Second Isaiah's expectations. During the same months in which he ordered the restoration of the pagan sanctuaries desecrated by the Babylonian kings (November–December 539 BCE to February–March 538 BCE), the Persian conqueror issued an edict "throughout his realm" concerning the repatriation of the exiles and

the reconstruction of Yahweh's Temple in Jerusalem.³⁴ This was consistent with his treatment of other nations that had suffered reprisals at the hands of the Babylonians. The Book of Ezra presents two versions of Cyrus' edict – one in Aramaic, the other in Hebrew – both of which appear to be genuine.³⁵ The Hebrew version reads:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, the God of Heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.³⁶

Because Yahweh, like Ahuramazda, was not worshipped with idols, there was no image to be restored at Jerusalem as at pagan shrines. However, the 5,400 or so gold and silver vessels that the Babylonians had lifted from the Temple represented suitable icons of divinity, and Cyrus promptly ordered their collection from the pagan shrines where Nabuchadnezzar had deposited them.³⁷ The Book of Ezra names a certain "Mithredath the Treasurer" as the Iranian official responsible for overseeing the Jewish repatriation. His name suggests Median ancestry, and we may fancy him to be the unnamed chancery official from Ecbatana mentioned alongside the Babylonian satrap, Gobryas, in a contract found at Dur-Karashu near Sippar.³⁸ To lead the exiles home, Mithredath appointed a certain Sheshbazzar, who, despite his Babylonian name (Akkadian *Shamash-apli-usur*, "May Shamash protect the son"), was recognized

as “a prince of Judah.”³⁹ Sheshbazzar received from Mithredath the necessary funds to transport his people to the Holy Land and commence the Temple’s reconstruction, but only a fraction of the population living in exile actually returned.⁴⁰ Clearly, many Jews had managed to thrive in Babylonia, working as farmers, merchants, and financiers, and were loath to abandon their new homeland.⁴¹

Those who returned relished the moment, however. Second Isaiah’s successors anticipated the joyous reunion of the exiles with their families in Judah with the following song:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

. . . Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.

Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.⁴²

As the classicist Andrew Burn explains, “These fine lines have been sacred to many as a prophecy of another Messiah [Christ]; but their *prima facie* meaning in the time they were written is that, with the abolition of frontiers and the breaking of the Babylonian monopoly [on the spice trade from Tema], commercial opportunities of unexampled richness would be offered to the crossroad land of Palestine between Arabia and the Mediterranean.”⁴³ The Book of Ezra further recounts that upon arriving at Jerusalem the repatriated families gave freewill offerings for the rebuilding of the Temple consisting of 61,000 gold drachmas, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priestly garments.⁴⁴ According to the same source, the

priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple-servants “settled in their own towns, along with some of the other people.”⁴⁵



Detail from *Cyrus Restores the Vessels of the Temple* by the nineteenth-century French painter Gustave Doré.

The actual reconstruction of the Temple seems to have commenced no sooner than two years after the first exiles returned home.⁴⁶ Sheshbazzar, who by this time had become governor of Judah, hired masons and carpenters as well as seamen from Sidon and Tyre to transport the expensive logs of Lebanese cedar that Cyrus had specified for the project. The Temple foundations were laid in an emotional ceremony attended by all the leaders of the Jewish community.⁴⁷

It is true that the Temple was not fully

reconstructed until 515 BCE, after numerous trials and tribulations that necessitated direct intervention by Darius I.⁴⁸ But with the restoration project underway, the Jews no longer had reason to doubt Yahweh's majesty.⁴⁹

Was the Persians' Treatment of the Jews "Special"?

Cyrus' reign marked the beginning of two centuries of close political contacts between the Persians and Jews. Throughout this period, the Achaemenids generally supported their Jewish subjects. Aside from authorizing the reconstruction of the Temple, the Persians played a major role in canonizing the Old Testament. Under Cyrus' great-grandson Artaxerxes I, the laws of the Torah, or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), became current among Jewish communities throughout the Persian Empire.⁵⁰ Artaxerxes assigned the task of legal codification to the priest-scribe Ezra, previously the leader of the Babylonian Jews. Ezra's mission proved critical to preserving the distinct religious and ethnic identity of the Jews, many of whom had adopted foreign habits, including the worship of pagan gods.⁵¹ Scholars have rightfully hailed Ezra as the second founder of Judaism, "inferior only to Moses himself," but like most religious reformers, he met with staunch opposition during his lifetime.⁵² In Israel, the enforcement of his laws fell to Nehemiah, the one-time cupbearer of Artaxerxes who used his influence with the king to become governor of Judah. Among other things, Nehemiah secured royal permission to rebuild Jerusalem's outer walls, a symbolical act that

appeased his subjects' demands for local autonomy.⁵³ The activities of Ezra and Nehemiah marked the last stages of the process that Cyrus had commenced of restoring the Jews to their homeland.

Given the important political contributions that Cyrus and his successors made to their Jewish subjects, it is hardly surprising that the Jews generally espoused a favorable view of Persian rule.⁵⁴ Although taxes were heavy during the Persian period, no evidence exists of Jewish authors denouncing the Persians, either in biblical or rabbinical literature.⁵⁵ By contrast, the Bible provides many examples of Jewish propaganda directed against other Gentilic peoples, such as the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks. The situation begs the question of whether the Jews received special treatment from the Persians and, if so, why? Some scholars suspect that the Persians recognized important doctrinal similarities between their own Zoroastrian religion and Judaism and, therefore, took a keen interest in the affairs of their Jewish subjects. Other scholars explain the alleged favor that Cyrus and his successors accorded the Jews strictly in terms of politico-military strategy. According to these scholars, the Persians sought to rebuild the Levantine cities that Nabuchadnezzar had destroyed – including Jerusalem – to create both a defensive bulwark against Egyptian aggression and a string of bases from which to launch military operations against the “Land of the Nile.”⁵⁶ Still other scholars maintain that the Persians did not shower special favors upon the Jews at all but merely treated them on par with their other subjects. This third view carries some merit, for the Cyrus Cylinder shows that the Persian founder repatriated other exiled groups

besides the Jews, and we now know that the codification of Jewish law commissioned by Artaxerxes I was in line with general Persian administrative practice.⁵⁷ As discussed in the next chapter, Persian policy was to rule each subject nation according to its own laws, provided that these were properly organized and made consistent with the overarching “Law of the King.” The problem in Israel on the eve of Ezra’s mission was that Jewish law had become so adulterated that Persian officials no longer knew what it entailed. Hence, the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah served a practical political purpose and do not necessarily indicate preferential treatment on the part of the Persians.

Nevertheless, one should not discount the possibility that the Persians learned about and appreciated the general resemblance between their own religion and that of the Jews at an early date. As indicated above, Second Isaiah appears to have been in direct contact with Cyrus’ camp during the buildup to the Persian invasion of Babylonia. Morton Smith has cited numerous parallels between Second Isaiah’s compositions and the text of the Cyrus Cylinder to prove this proposition. According to Smith, these parallels demonstrate that the biblical prophet and the author of the Cyrus Cylinder derived their propaganda from the same source. Furthermore, because certain passages attributed to Second Isaiah seem to have predated the fall of Babylon, this source could only have been a member of Cyrus’ camp.⁵⁸ Smith’s finding is significant, inasmuch as it implies that Persian officials provided not only the inspiration for Second Isaiah’s propaganda but also some of the content. For this content to be meaningful, the Persians had to

possess a basic understanding of Jewish religious beliefs.⁵⁹ Even in its pre-Exilic form, Judaism resembled Zoroastrianism in its henotheistic underpinnings and abhorrence of idol worship. These traits were unusual in the ancient Near East, and we may fancy that informed Zoroastrians viewed the Jews as kindred spirits from a religious standpoint, even if there is no proof of the Persian kings treating the Jews preferentially as a result.

Was There Iranian Religious Influence upon Judaism?

Irrespective of whether the Achaemenids took a special interest in the welfare of their Jewish subjects, conditions were ripe for the Persians to influence Jewish religious thought.⁶⁰ The sixth and fifth centuries BCE were a period of competing religions, and the Jews properly acknowledged Cyrus and his successors for playing a decisive role in the survival of their faith. Such feelings of gratitude presumably aroused Jewish curiosity as to the religious beliefs of their Persian benefactors, and inquisitive Jews must have quickly realized that Zoroastrianism and Judaism shared many of the same doctrines. It is not inconceivable that this understanding, coupled with the generally positive opinion that the Jews had of Persian rule, paved the way for Jewish receptivity to Iranian religious influence.⁶¹ Such influence has been cited in connection with several important concepts relating to the nature of God, dualism, and human and universal eschatology that first attained prominence in Jewish literature of the Exilic and post-Exilic periods.

Of course, not all scholars accept that Judaism's development owed anything to Iran. The very notion of such influence remains controversial, largely because the supporting evidence is circumstantial. Numerous counterarguments favoring Judaism's independent evolution have been advanced.⁶² Perhaps the most important of these involves the theory of an Axial Age. According to this theory, the fundamental transformation that Judaism underwent during and after the period of Exile fits the pattern of other spiritual and philosophical movements, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Platonism, which emerged independently of one other in different parts of the world between 800 BCE and 200 BCE. The common thread to all these movements was the quest for human meaning, which precipitated a rethinking of man's place in the universe and his relationship to the divine. It has been argued that Axial philosophies developed in response to harsh social conditions that moved innovative thinkers to explain the unpleasant realities of the mundane world in terms of a higher metaphysical or ethical order. Viewed from this perspective, any similarities between Exilic and post-Exilic Judaism, on the one hand, and Zoroastrianism, on the other, demonstrate only that the two religions developed under comparable circumstances; they do not indicate the actual transmission of ideas from one faith to the other.⁶³

Although the theory of an Axial Age carries much weight, we should not dismiss offhand the notion of a formative Iranian influence upon Judaism. After all, the Iranians and Jews were in direct contact with one another during the critical period in which Judaism reinvented itself, and as we have seen, Iranian rulers

starting with Cyrus expressed a genuine interest in institutionalizing Jewish religious practices through the efforts of handpicked officials, such as Sheshbazzar, Ezra, and Nehemiah. At minimum, these and other Jewish leaders must have been attuned to those elements of Iranian religious thought made prominent by the political ideology of the Achaemenid kings.⁶⁴ What is more, the Persian Empire heralded an unprecedented age of cultural syncretism.⁶⁵ If the principal achievement of the Jewish Axial Age was to transform Yahweh from a tribal god into a universal one, then how can we discount the impact of an empire that subsumed all the cultures of the ancient East, knocking down borders and expanding popular notions of geography, especially when this empire was ruled by kings who believed in precisely such an abstract and transcendental deity? Put differently, is it realistic to think that the Iranians and Jews thought so much alike that they could have independently developed the same religious doctrines to answer the same basic questions about human existence? The answer is far from clear, given that the two peoples belonged to wholly distinct cultural traditions.

Although we may never know whether Iran exercised a notable religious influence upon Judaism, one point deserves clarification. As John Hinnells has explained, religious influence generally functions as a subconscious process; it involves “the modification of one’s existing beliefs in accord with ideas held by those with whom one comes into close contact and to whom one has, generally speaking, an attitude of respect.”⁶⁶ Hinnells’ explanation removes some of the controversy surrounding the issue of Iranian religious influence. Indeed, his analysis suggests that Judaism’s

incorporation of Iranian religious concepts did not involve an overt surrender to foreign religious thought; rather, it entailed an attempt by the Jews to express their own religion in terms intelligible within a Zoroastrian context, without adopting the overall structure or framework of the Iranian religion, or even acknowledging it as a source of inspiration.⁶⁷ What follows is a brief discussion of those aspects of Judaism in which Iranian influence has been discerned.

Specific Instances of Possible Iranian Influence

Given the nature of Second Isaiah's relations with the Persians, it is not surprising that the earliest evidence of Iranian religious influence upon Judaism has been sought in his works. Second Isaiah was the first Hebrew prophet to truly emphasize Yahweh's role as the creator of the cosmos.⁶⁸ As Morton Smith has observed, the notion that Yahweh created the world appears sporadically in earlier biblical literature, "but such occasional references merely render conspicuous the prophets' usual neglect of the subject."⁶⁹ By contrast, the notion serves as a major theme in Second Isaiah's compositions. Specifically, the anonymous prophet mentions Yahweh's creation of the cosmos to assure his listeners that their god is powerful enough to repatriate the exiles by manipulating affairs on the world stage, mainly through the actions of his beloved agent, Cyrus. Ezekiel, who lived a generation before Second Isaiah, also foretold the eventual restoration of Israel but without reference to Yahweh's creative powers, which, in his mind, were somewhat irrelevant

to the task of freeing the Jews.⁷⁰ On the contrary, the steady emphasis that Second Isaiah lays upon this doctrine suggests that the concept of “Yahweh the Creator” was relatively new in his day and that his audience lacked familiarity with it.⁷¹

To fully appreciate the novelty of Second Isaiah’s message, we must consider Yahweh’s portrayal in earlier biblical texts. These texts describe Yahweh not as the “God of Heaven,” a majestic title that first attains prominence in post-Exilic literature, but as a quasi-anthropomorphic being. Thus, in the oldest stratum of the Book of Genesis, Yahweh strolls through the Garden of Eden like a man.⁷² He even fears that the construction of the Tower of Babel will enable humanity to cast him out of heaven.⁷³ Other pre-Exilic passages portray Yahweh as a sword-wielding warrior, fighting against the multi-headed sea dragon Leviathan.⁷⁴ Yahweh’s battle with Leviathan has parallels in Babylonian and Canaanite mythology, and based on these, we may surmise that the original Jewish myth served, in part, to explain the ordering of the cosmos out of chaos.⁷⁵ However, the early Yahweh was never regarded as the source of all creation, as important elements of the cosmos pre-existed his slaying of the beast; rather, the fundamental focus of the myth was Yahweh’s supremacy vis-à-vis other deities, who were fearful of the monster.⁷⁶

For Second Isaiah, this half-hearted notion of a divine creator was wholly inadequate. The anonymous prophet clearly had something greater in mind when he hailed Yahweh as the “Lord, who has made all things.” Biblical scholars commonly attribute to Second Isaiah the earliest portrayal of Yahweh in an

unequivocally monotheistic light. “I am the Lord, and there is no other,” he has God say.⁷⁷ This principle has been hailed “as the great triumph of the Jewish Axial Age,” and is unprecedented in the Old Testament’s earlier strata, wherein Yahweh appears as one of many gods and one who, moreover, occasionally suffers defeat at the hands of these other deities.⁷⁸

Zoroastrian inspiration for Second Isaiah’s revolutionary theology has been claimed on both general and specific grounds. Regarding the former basis, several scholars have observed that Second Isaiah’s perception of Yahweh bears a striking resemblance to Ahuramazda, whom Zoroastrians have always venerated as the sole uncreated god, the fountainhead of all good creation, and the only deity worthy of the title “Creator,” which often substitutes for his name.⁷⁹ Regarding the latter basis, Morton Smith has discovered what he believes constitutes more precise evidence of Zoroastrian influence in Second Isaiah’s apparent paraphrasing of the Gathas. In one of the most important Gathas, Zoroaster defines Ahuramazda’s omnipotence through a series of rhetorical questions directed to the Wise Lord regarding the origin of the cosmos. In each instance, the expected answer from Ahuramazda is “I am” or “I do.” In the Bible, Second Isaiah appears to answer all of Zoroaster’s rhetorical questions, with Yahweh taking the place of Ahuramazda. The following are a few representative examples:

Zoroaster: “Next I ask you – tell me rightly, O Lord – who was, at its birth, the original father of justice?”⁸⁰

Second Isaiah: “Let the skies rain down justice . . . I, Yahweh, have created it.”⁸¹

Zoroaster: “Next I ask you – tell me rightly, O Lord – who

fixed the earth below and the sky of clouds, that it should not fall?"⁸²

Second Isaiah: "The creator of the heavens, he is the one God; the shaper and maker of the earth, he is the one who established it."⁸³

Zoroaster: "Who, O Wise One, is the creator of right thought?"⁸⁴

Second Isaiah: "I, Yahweh, speak the truth; I declare what is right."⁸⁵

According to Smith, these and other parallels do not prove a "direct literary dependence" between Second Isaiah's compositions and the Gathas, especially since any ancient attempt at cosmology would have accounted for the same natural phenomena. Nevertheless, it is peculiar that Second Isaiah often intertwines his references to Yahweh the Creator with his propagandistic claims about Cyrus (see Appendix XI). For Smith, this detail implies that the Jewish prophet's theological utterances were inspired by a Persian source. In this regard, Smith notes the close connection between cosmology and political propaganda in later Persian inscriptions. These texts typically cite Ahuramazda's creation of the earth, sky, and man to accredit his conferral of sovereignty upon the Persian king.[‡] The ultimate inference made by Smith and the scholars who follow him is that Second Isaiah heard a Persian prophecy promising Babylon to Cyrus in the name of Ahuramazda, god of creation, and that this prophecy stimulated the biblical prophet to think of Yahweh in terms reminiscent of the Iranian deity.

Whatever the truth, Second Isaiah's novel notion of the creation precipitated the need for a new Jewish cosmogony, and it has been argued that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis represents a later stage

of thought and response to his teachings.⁸⁶ Most scholars now believe that this portion of Genesis, together with parts of Leviticus, Exodus, and Numbers, was authored by one or more scribes belonging to the so-called Priestly Source, or “P.” These scribes were descendants of exiled priests who continued to live in Babylonia until the time of Ezra, about eighty years after Cyrus’ death. P’s writings represent the fourth and final layer of the Pentateuch and embody many new theological concepts. The famous account of the creation found in Genesis 1 thus differs drastically from the original creation myth, which focused on Yahweh’s duel with Leviathan. In contrast to the old Yahweh, P’s God does not create through violence but by command. “Let there be light!” he declares on the First Day, and there is light. Some have attributed this development to the suffering inflicted by Nabuchadnezzar, the trauma of which motivated the Jews to eliminate violent themes from their myths. However, such thinking does not account for the complete contrast between the old and new creation stories. The very cosmology of Genesis 1 differs from that of the second chapter of Genesis, which takes place in the Garden of Eden. With its sweeping cosmic setting, the revised myth strives to present God in a more sublime, transcendental, and ultimately stronger light. Competition with Marduk may have been a motivating factor, as some scholars have interpreted the new Jewish cosmogony as a polemic against the Babylonian creation epic; and the two myths certainly share several important characteristics, including the reference to a primeval watery chaos and a seven-stage creation, ending with a day of rest.⁸⁷ But certain aspects of the new Jewish

cosmogony lack precedent in ancient Mesopotamian mythologies, despite directly recalling core elements of the Zoroastrian worldview.

One example highlighted by Mary Boyce concerns the reference in Genesis I to the “Spirit of God.”⁸⁸ The declaration preceding the First Day holds: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”⁸⁹ Despite some wrangling, biblical scholars generally maintain that in this context the Spirit of God represents the “active principle” or “driving factor,” “wholly necessary in order to accomplish a creation.”⁹⁰ Because the idea of a demiurge was foreign to Mesopotamian thought, this aspect of the myth is unlikely to have originated there. The idea was, however, intrinsic to Zoroastrianism, which hailed Ahuramazda as the “Creator of all things through the Holy Spirit [Spenta Mainyu].”⁹¹ In Zoroastrianism, Ahuramazda relies upon Spenta Mainyu to achieve creation in the Material World, because he himself resides in the abstract World of Thought. Yet, the demiurge is merely an emanation of Ahuramazda, such that the Wise Lord remains the ultimate source of creation. The same dynamic appears in Genesis, the author(s) of which deemed it sufficient to state that God created.

Another detail of Genesis I that may betray Zoroastrian influence is the steady emphasis upon the goodness of God’s creations.⁹² This is an element of the revised Jewish cosmogony for which no close parallel exists in extant Mesopotamian literature or other parts of the Old Testament. On the other hand, Zoroastrians have always believed in the inherent

goodness of Ahuramazda and his material creations (in their view, unsightly things are conjured up by Angra Mainyu, the Zoroastrian devil, to contaminate the good creations of Ahuramazda). So important was this doctrine that it finds direct reflection in multiple Achaemenid inscriptions. For example, at Naqsh-e Rostam, Darius I declares: “A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this wonderful work that is seen.” The “wonderful work” alluded to in this inscription is the creation of the earth, the heavens, and man, which is explicitly mentioned in other royal proclamations.⁹³ As one might expect from men who claimed to be Ahuramazda’s earthly representatives, the Achaemenid kings even made a point of emphasizing the goodness of their own “creations.” Thus, in one building inscription from Susa, Darius concludes his account of a construction project by proclaiming: “At Susa, a wonderful work [Old Persian *frasha*] was ordered; an exceedingly wonderful work it was.”⁹⁴ That Darius composed this inscription with Zoroastrian doctrines in mind is evident from his choice of the word *frasha* to denote a “wonderful work.”⁹⁵ This word, translated into Akkadian simply as “good,” has a distinct eschatological connotation in Zoroastrianism, as we will soon see. For now, it suffices to state that, like Darius, the God of Genesis admires his own creations. He does so both after each individual creation (for example, “God set [the sun, moon, and stars] in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good.”) and again after everything has been formed (“God saw all that he made, and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning –

the sixth day.”).⁹⁶

The Zoroastrian conviction in the intrinsic goodness of Ahuramazda and his creations reflected the more fundamental belief in a cosmic opposition between the eternal forces of Truth and the Lie. This distinctive feature of the Iranian religion was well known to the Persians’ subjects and neighbors, including the Greeks, and formed an integral part of Achaemenid royal ideology, in all likelihood, as early as Cyrus’ reign. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that Judaism became increasingly dualistic during the Exilic and post-Exilic periods, when the Jews and Persians came into direct contact with one another. One notable manifestation of this development rests in the changed character of Satan. Scholars have long recognized the difference between the ethically ambivalent Satan of the Old Testament and the fiendish devil of the New Testament.⁹⁷ According to many scholars, this transformation in Satan’s character is unlikely to have been influenced by other Semitic religions, which placed little emphasis on ethical dualism.⁹⁸ Rather, the closest parallel and likeliest source of inspiration has been identified as Zoroastrianism, with its belief in an evil principle, Angra Mainyu, the unforgiving enemy of Ahuramazda.⁹⁹

Satan’s evolution predictably corresponded with the development of an elaborate demonology, and here, again, evidence of Zoroastrian influence has been sought. In particular, Zoroastrian influence has been cited in connection with Judaism’s late formulation of a hierarchy of six arch-demons supporting Satan.¹⁰⁰ This doctrine has been compared to the late Zoroastrian portrayal of Angra Mainyu as

the most prominent of seven malignant spirits, who represent the evil counterparts of Ahuramazda and the Amesha Spentas.¹⁰¹

Before the Exile, the Jews had worshipped Yahweh mainly because he was the God of Israel, not because he embodied positive human traits, such as mercy or kindness.¹⁰² Yahweh's espousal of such traits constituted a major theme in Jewish literature of the Persian period, including non-canonical texts, such as the Book of Tobit.¹⁰³ This change in Yahweh's character mirrors the demonization of Satan and, according to some scholars, reflects the impact of Zoroastrian dualism. Because good and evil are ethical principles, Yahweh's characterization as a benevolent deity led to his portrayal in an increasingly abstract light.¹⁰⁴ One important consequence of Yahweh's heightened abstraction was the "need to acknowledge lesser immortal beings, his servants, who would bridge the vast gulf that now opened between him and his worshippers."¹⁰⁵ The increased prominence of angels in post-Exilic Judaism is at least partly explainable on this basis.¹⁰⁶ Particularly noteworthy are the six or seven arch-angels that have been compared to the Zoroastrian Amesha Spentas (who also number six or seven depending upon the treatment of Spenta Mainyu – the Holy Spirit – as identical to or distinct from Ahuramazda).¹⁰⁷

Angelology and demonology are, of course, of lesser importance to religious practice today than they were in the past. Ideas concerning personal and universal eschatology are more germane, for they continue to color religious, philosophical, and political thought in many parts of the world. These may also have been the areas of theology in which Iranian

beliefs had the greatest impact upon Judaism. Like other Semitic peoples, the pre-Exilic Jews did not believe in an afterlife.¹⁰⁸ They never thought that the deceased would revive “to a permanent full consciousness either in this, or in the spiritual world.”¹⁰⁹ The absence of a future existence could be tolerated during periods of national prosperity, when life was good, but the circumstances surrounding the Exile necessitated a major doctrinal modification. The destruction of the Temple marked the fall of the national cult and shifted the focus of the religion onto the individual. This shift naturally precipitated questions about a future life in which the elusive justice of this world would be served. Jewish exposure to Zoroastrianism, with its attractive doctrines concerning the immortality of the soul and the existence of heaven, first occurred at this critical juncture. Not surprisingly, a number of scholars attribute to Zoroastrian inspiration the transformation of Sheol, the Jewish abode of the dead, from a dreary oblivion into a place where righteous and wicked souls are rewarded and punished.¹¹⁰

References to post-mortal judgment in the inscriptions of Cyrus’ successors – including Darius’ Bisutun Inscription – indicate that the religious doctrine attained prominence in early Achaemenid political ideology, as may have been the case with Zoroaster’s teachings on universal eschatology.¹¹¹ Regarding the latter, Zoroastrian Persians of Cyrus’ day believed in a period of finite time, spanning 9,000 years, commencing with the dawn of creation and culminating with the final purging of evil from the world.¹¹² This task of purification was deemed to be the work of the Saoshyant, or end-of-time Savior, who

would lead the charge against the minions of the Lie on behalf of Ahuramazda. At the Saoshyant's victory, Angra Mainyu would sink "forever into darkness" and the world would return to the original, perfect state in which Ahuramazda had created it through a process of renovation, termed the *frasha-kareti* (literally, the "making wonderful"). The great renovation would entail a terrible ordeal, however: the resurrection of all mankind and the crossing of a molten river. The river would not harm the righteous, who would wade through it painlessly, as if through warm milk, but it would utterly destroy the wicked or, according to an alternate theory, burn them until their sins were absolved.¹¹³ Thus purified, humanity, and indeed all creation, would attain to Ahuramazda's Khshathra Vairya, or Desirable Kingdom, wherein peace rules and "nothing is done or stirred up, yet everything happens."¹¹⁴ The doctrine of the great renovation was as integral to the Zoroastrian world view as the idea that Ahuramazda created the cosmos, and indications are that, as part of their official propaganda, the Achaemenids, including Cyrus, claimed to prepare the world for the great renovation by establishing *Arta* ("Truth," "Order") throughout their realm.[§]

It is perhaps not surprising that, during the post-Exilic period, the Jews developed a doctrine of universal eschatology compatible with the changed conditions of their own existence. This doctrine arose from the yearning, spawned by the trauma of the Exile, that a Messiah from the house of David would one day re-establish an autonomous Jewish state based out of Jerusalem. Ezekiel alluded to this glorious event by using the metaphor of the Jewish people rising from the dead.¹¹⁵ Among the Jews in the

homeland, the restoration of the Davidic kingdom was, for many years, a matter of strictly political import, for they viewed this Jewish kingdom of the future as a mere reiteration of the pre-Exilic Judah, which had existed in more or less parochial isolation. By contrast, the Jews in Babylonia and other provinces of the Persian Empire came to adopt a dramatically different view.

Living among foreigners, these Jews understood that only a world conqueror capable of ruling over Jew and Gentile alike in the manner of an Achaemenid King of Kings could effectuate the political unification of their scattered communities. This realization, coupled with the aforementioned belief that God would bring doom upon the nations, resulted in their perception of the Messiah as a universal savior. The idea took many years to develop and reached full maturity only in post-Achaemenid times. However, according to the historian Arnold Toynbee, Cyrus' meteoric rise to power was one of the pivotal events that enabled the Jews to believe in a universal Messiah with true conviction in the first place.¹¹⁶ After all, why should the Jews think their champion incapable of conquering the world, when they had seen Cyrus raise the hitherto obscure Persians to an unprecedented dominion far greater than anything Sargon or Nabuchadnezzar could have hoped to achieve? This notion of a universal Messiah, which eventually gained currency in the Jewish homeland, received further definition through the heightened prominence of dualism and demonology in post-Exilic Judaism. The Jewish Messiah thus became an agent of the divine who, like the Zoroastrian Saoshyant, would raise the dead, eradicate evil, and

establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The belief that the savior would be born to a virgin represents another striking parallel between the Jewish Messiah and the Saoshyant.[¶]

In assessing the impact that Iranian religion had on Judaism, three points bear consideration. First, Iranian influence did not obscure the central tenet of Judaism, which was the greatness of God and his unique bond with Israel.¹¹⁷ Second, those elements of Judaism that were most heavily influenced by Zoroastrianism assumed their greatest significance during the Intertestamental period but then lost some of their prominence in the Jewish religion shortly thereafter; third, the same doctrines (including dualism and human and universal eschatology) survived in and became the focus of Christian theology.¹¹⁸ We may fancy that this was the true gift of the Magi.

‡ Judah was one of the two successor states to the Israelite kingdom that David founded during the eleventh century BCE. The kingdom bifurcated following the death of David's son, Solomon, in 931 BCE. The southern state, known as Judah, had as its capital Jerusalem and remained under the rule of Davidic kings until the sixth century BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire during the eighth century BCE. As was their practice, the Assyrians settled large numbers of foreigners in the northern kingdom, while deporting thousands of Israelites to other parts of their empire. The northern kingdom thus lost much of its Israelite character, and the term "Samaritan" refers to the ethnically mixed population that inhabited the region surrounding Samaria following the Assyrian conquest. Unless otherwise indicated, we will use the name "Judah" throughout the rest of this chapter to denote the political state centered on Jerusalem and the name "Israel" to denote the entire nation descended from Jacob, rather than the northern kingdom that the Assyrians had conquered.

§ The biblical Book of Isaiah consists of the writings of several authors, the names of all but one of whom are unknown. Divided into

66 chapters, the book derives its name from the one known author: the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz, who lived during the eighth century BCE. His writings are included in the set of compositions known as “First Isaiah,” or “Proto-Isaiah,” which are found in chapters 1 through 39 of the book (these chapters also include the works of several unknown seventh and sixth century BCE authors). The name “Second Isaiah,” or “Deutero-Isaiah,” applies to both the anonymous sixth century BCE prophet and the chapters attributed to him (40 through 55). “Third Isaiah,” also known as “Trito-Isaiah,” is the name given to the remaining chapters of the book (56 through 66), which were probably composed by multiple authors following the return of the Exiles to Jerusalem. This portion of the book may also contain a few prophecies uttered by the individual known as Second Isaiah. The traditional explanation for the inclusion of these different writings within the same book pertains to the consistent tone and spirit of the compositions. However, it is also possible that the relevant authors all belonged to the same prophetic order, founded by the original Isaiah, in the eighth century BCE; see S. Smith (1944), 75.

¶ See page 106.

** Isaiah 42:1–42:7. This and three other passages (49:1–49:12, 50:4–50:11, and 52:13–53:12) interspersed throughout Second Isaiah’s compositions are commonly referred to as “Servant Songs.” They are so named because each mentions an unidentified “servant of Yahweh.” Talmudic and medieval commentators interpreted the servant to be the nation of Israel as a whole. Some modern authorities have followed suit, whereas others have interpreted the passages as references to other ancient Jewish figures, such as Zerubbabel or Jehoiakin. Since the late nineteenth century CE, a number of scholars have argued – on the basis of subject and treatment, but not of language or style – that the Servant Songs represent later interpolations into the text of Second Isaiah. However, I have followed those scholars – for example, S. Smith (1944), M. Smith (1963), A. Netzer (1974) – who have interpreted the Servant Song at Isaiah 42:1–42:7 as a reference to Cyrus.

† Of course, Josephus would not have known this detail, because, already by his time, memory of Second Isaiah had faded to the point that his verses were believed to evince the clairvoyance of the First Isaiah, who flourished during the eighth century BCE.

‡ “The fact that virtually all Old Persian royal inscriptions of more than a few lines open with a brief theological statement, consisting of the affirmation that Ahuramazda is the creator of heaven, earth, and human life, sharply distinguishes these texts from the vast corpus of royal inscriptions from the ancient Near East, which only use such opening lines when the inscription actually refers to religious

activities (such as dedicating a divine statue or [re-]opening a temple”); de Jong (2005), 89. We may speculate that the Achaemenids used this introduction in the same manner that devout Moslems preface important utterances with the invocation, “In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.” Indeed, it is now standard practice in the Islamic Republic of Iran to begin all speeches, interviews, and publications in the name of God.

§ See Appendix XX.

¶ In addition to the similarities noted in the previous paragraph of the main text, both the Messiah and the Saoshyant are born to virgins. Both bring about the final salvation of the world following a series of natural and political disasters, including wars, the flattening of mountains, and the attack of an evil dragonish monster that breaks free of its bonds after a thousand-year-long captivity. Christian texts identify this beast with Satan, whereas in Zoroastrianism it is Azhi Dahaka.

One King of Many, One Lord of Many: The Royal Ideology and Administration of the Persian Empire

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the universe, the son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, of an eternal line of kingship

—The Cyrus Cylinder

Babylon marked the last of Cyrus' important conquests, and with it, the Persian king brought all the great centers of Eastern civilization, with the sole exception of Egypt, under his sway. We may be sure that Cyrus did not remain entirely idle from a military standpoint during the last decade of his reign. Strabo alludes to Persian generals fighting the Sakas in Armenia; Xenophon mentions a campaign to the coast of the Indian Ocean, and Cyrus' great expedition into the territory of the Massagetae in 530 BCE may have

followed on the heels of additional forays into Central Asia.¹ We may never know. What is clear is that Cyrus focused most of his efforts after taking Babylon on organizing his empire, which now stretched from the Jaxartes River to the Sinai desert and from the Aegean Sea to the Hindu Kush. Dwarfing all kingdoms to have preceded it, the Persian Empire encompassed much of the known world – a detail that the official propaganda never tired of emphasizing. According to Xenophon, “the extremes of [Cyrus’] empire were uninhabitable, on the one side because of the heat, on another because of the cold, on another because of too much water, and on the fourth because of too little.”² Within these idealized boundaries lived a population of between seventeen and thirty-five million, drawn from “all kinds of races” (as the royal inscriptions state), some of which the Persians had only recently encountered for the first time.³ One of Cyrus’ greatest successes was to lay the groundwork for a political system that united all these different peoples for nearly two and a half centuries. In so doing, Cyrus distinguished himself from other empire builders, such as Alexander, whose conquests quickly disintegrated after they died.

Many scholars credit Darius I, and not Cyrus, with devising the administration of the Persian Empire, and Darius surely did much to define the character of Persian rule. He entrenched the power of the king, reorganized the empire’s tax districts, eliminated administrative inefficiencies, introduced a standard form of currency, and codified the laws of the various subject nations. However, the underlying ideology of his rule – namely, an absolute monarchy tolerant and abiding of different cultures – represented an

extension of Cyrus'. The same holds true for the administrative apparatus that Darius wielded. The satrapal system of government, which Herodotus characterizes as an innovation of Darius, had actually existed under Cyrus, the Medes, and even the Assyrians.⁴ It is, in fact, extremely noteworthy that the image of satrapal government presented in the Bisutun Inscription, which was inscribed before Darius launched his administrative reforms, closely resembles that which the Alexander historians provide for the empire's final days.⁵ The implication is that the roles and responsibilities of the satraps, the key officials in the administration of the provinces, did not change significantly from the time of Darius' predecessors to that of the Macedonian conquest. Furthermore, because Cambyses II ruled for only seven years and five months, during which his main focus was the conquest of Egypt and other territories in northern Africa, it seems reasonable to assume that the administrative structure that Darius inherited was largely the work of Cyrus.⁶

What factors did Cyrus consider in administering his empire? One relatively recent study of four ancient and medieval empires has yielded important conclusions regarding the types of obstacles that generally impeded effective rule: first, the king invariably encounters difficulty in winning the allegiance of aristocrats in conquered lands; and second, imperial bureaucrats (officials appointed by the king) invariably strive to obtain political autonomy and acquire aristocratic privileges for themselves (such as transforming appointed offices into hereditary ones).⁷ To this we can add another consideration: in unifying the Medes and Persians and

achieving his later conquests, Cyrus had won support by promising to reverse the policies of his adversaries and perhaps even by advocating a new paradigm and idealism in statecraft. However, once the empire was established, he had to view his use of power and its consequences more realistically, and this led him to employ certain tactics favored by past (and future) imperial powers. Balancing the interests of the monarchy, aristocracy, and bureaucracy, while appeasing the masses, without whose consent no regime is stable, represented the true key to political success. The enormous size and cultural diversity of the Persian Empire must have made this balancing act particularly daunting for Cyrus, but that his empire thrived (even after his reign) implies that he was up to the task.

From Tribal Leader to Great King

As with most ancient monarchies, everything in the Persian Empire began and ended with the king. He was the ultimate fountainhead of justice and wielded the power of life and death over his subjects. This much we know from the inscriptions of Darius and his successors, as well as from the earliest extant classical accounts of the Persian Empire, which date to the middle of the fifth century BCE. These sources all portray the Persian king more in the mold of an Assyrian emperor than a tribal chieftain, thus begging the question of how and when the necessary political transition took place. Some historians have speculated that the transition to absolute monarchy occurred no earlier than the reign of Darius. According to them,

Cyrus ruled over an egalitarian Aryan kingship, which Darius transformed into an oriental despotism.⁸ However, classical tradition does not remember Darius as having started the process. Arrian, for one, attributed to Cyrus the institution of *proskynesis* as a ceremonial act among the Persians.⁹ *Proskynesis* was the customary obeisance that the Persians offered the king. Although it is still unclear whether the act involved prostration, the blowing of a kiss, or some combination of both, the Greeks considered it blasphemous to perform *proskynesis* before any mortal entity, and this belief precipitated significant difficulties whenever Greeks received royal audiences.¹⁰ Given the traditional manner in which the ancient Persians greeted each other (see page 62), the institution of *proskynesis* marked a significant development, insofar as it formalized the superiority of the king vis-à-vis his nobles, who could no longer make physical contact with him. The lofty titles that Cyrus assumed in his Babylonian inscriptions, particularly the Cyrus Cylinder, further reinforce the notion that the Persian founder came to rule as an absolute monarch. Indeed, it seems unlikely that a leader who styled himself the “Great King,” “Mighty King,” and “King of the Four Quarters of the Universe” would tolerate substantial limits to his authority.



Detail of the bowing officer in Median costume from an audience scene discovered at Persepolis. The hand gesture has been interpreted as either blowing a kiss to the king or covering the mouth to avoid breathing on him. This gesture may have been part of the *proskynesis*, or ritual obeisance, which the Achaemenid kings demanded of their subjects. The indentations on the arms were once filled with gold to give the impression of actual bracelets and armlets.

How then did Cyrus transform the kingship that he inherited without suffering the same fate as Astyages? Given the limits of the available information, we may conjecture that Cyrus took advantage of the continuous state of war that existed during the first two decades of his reign (559–539 BCE). In today's world, wartime politics differ from the norm in that they feature an entrenchment of the executive power in order to facilitate quicker action and less debate. Very much the same held true in Iran

two thousand five hundred years ago, with the added consideration that Cyrus must also have benefited from the rapid growth of his empire. The tribal aristocrats most likely to object to the institutionalization of an absolute monarchy had little to grumble about while their wealth and estates were steadily increasing.¹¹ This would have been true even of those powerful Median nobles, such as Harpagus, who had striven to depose Astyages for attempting to centralize royal power. Viewed from this perspective, Cyrus' immense success as a conqueror meant that he needed only a slight nudge to arrogate for himself the same authority that his grandfather Astyages had so desperately coveted. The process of royal empowerment, which likely began during the war with the Medes when Cyrus set himself up as the just counterpart to the tyrannical Astyages, must have culminated with the Persian conquest of Babylon, by which time no one could doubt Cyrus' right to absolute power.¹²

Of course, Cyrus' innate charisma must have eased the political transition, as did some well-staged artifice. According to Xenophon, the Persian nobles first rendered *proskynesis* to Cyrus, when, during an important state occasion, he emerged from the gates of his palace in full regalia.¹³ Xenophon clearly repeats the official party line when he speculates that the glory of Cyrus' appearance was what prompted the nobles to drop to the ground that day. The truth seems to lurk, instead, in the Athenian's further insinuation that Cyrus had instructed his erstwhile supporters to begin performing "the act of homage" so that the rest of the nobles in attendance would follow suit.¹⁴ As this suggests, certain nobles were reluctant to honor Cyrus

by performing *proskynesis*.**

The Persian monarchy's superficial trappings commanded the attention of the Greeks and the empire's other subjects. This was by design. Man responds best to what he sees, and Xenophon describes the various steps that Cyrus took to make himself seem larger than life. Specifically, Xenophon provides that Cyrus, together with his officers and attendants, began wearing magnificent Median cloaks on public occasions, and that the Persian king instituted rigid protocols to control access to his person. If Herodotus is correct in identifying the Medes as the first Iranians to establish a complex ceremonial of royalty, then it is easy to see where Cyrus, who had spent his early years in Astyages' court, received the inspiration for his own reforms.

The sitting of the Achaemenid court was a magnificent sight and is described in various sources. The bas-reliefs at Persepolis offer an even more vivid picture of the pomp and circumstance that surrounded the king. There, the Persian ruler appears seated upon a gilded throne with the crown prince and various attendants arrayed behind him. Rows of armed guards protect the royal entourage, while special officers, each carrying a short staff or mace, escort guests into the palace for an audience. These carvings provide a sense of the grandeur, glory, and solemnity of the imperial court. The Book of Esther relates that no one but the king himself could sit upon the royal throne on pain of death and that capital punishment also awaited those who entered the royal presence unannounced.¹⁵ According to Plutarch, the king's costume was worth twelve thousand talents, almost equaling the empire's annual tax revenue. It consisted

of an ankle-length robe, colored purple with the richest dye and interwoven with gold and silver fabric; the *kidaris*, a tall, jewel-studded crown; ornate armlets and bracelets made of precious metals; and a long, slender scepter, perhaps wrought from solid gold. The same author reports that the sheath of the *akinakes*, or dagger, that dangled from the king's belt was carved from a single emerald! Thus bedecked, the king was very much the center of attention, and it was in furtherance of this ideal, states Xenophon, that Cyrus even concealed a platform in the car of his chariot, to make himself seem taller than his charioteer whenever he went for a ride.¹⁶ A brief episode from Herodotus' account of Xerxes' march to Greece conveys the desired effect of all this ostentation; a Greek peasant who happened to catch a glimpse of Xerxes at the head of the Persian army in 480 BCE reportedly exclaimed: "Why O God, have you assumed the shape of a man from Persia, and changed your name to Xerxes, in order to lead everyone in the world to the conquest and devastation of Greece? You could have destroyed Greece without going to all that trouble!"¹⁷

In later times, an even heavier aura shrouded the king. Cyrus and his immediate successors were too recently removed from the old tribal order to completely neglect the spirit of camaraderie and communalism that was so intrinsic to tribal life. However, future rulers, who were "born into the purple," set themselves entirely apart. Thus, fourth century BCE Persian kings hosted magnificent nightly banquets in their palaces, yet never feasted in the company of their nobles, preferring, instead, to dine behind a screen through which they could see all, while remaining hidden themselves. Nor did these

rulers speak freely with their companions, for tradition deigned the king's every word to be infallible and to carry the force of law.¹⁸ With court protocol restricting his every action, the monarch became a slave to the very institution that gave him complete control. For the Persian king, "the pinnacle of power was a lonely perch," to quote John Manuel Cook's concise analysis of the situation, and it was precisely this isolation of the king that ultimately ruined the empire.¹⁹ For as long as the Persian king maintained a circle of trust comprised of devoted nobles who proved to be competent administrators, businessmen, and warriors, the monarchy remained in good stead; problems arose when the king shunned these same nobles, either rightly or wrongly, as potential threats to the throne, or otherwise abused his power so thoroughly that his councilors no longer presented matters to him frankly but only told him what he wanted to hear.

The monarchy that Cyrus established functioned smoothly with him or Darius at the helm but failed in the hands of less capable rulers. In this sense, it can be said to have been susceptible to corruption. But a strong tradition of god-kings existed throughout the ancient world, particularly in Mesopotamia and Egypt, such that the masses expected their leaders to appear divine.²⁰ So universal was this phenomenon that even the Greeks, whose philosophers constantly criticized the pitfalls of Persian despotism, worshipped Alexander the Great as a deity. Besides, democracy was still unproven as a political system, especially on the imperial level, and would remain so for thousands of years.²¹ No ancient empire, not even the Roman Republic, managed to survive without eventually

entrusting absolute power to a single individual. This somber fact recalls the substance of Darius' address at the conference, at which, according to Herodotus, the seven conspirators who overthrew Gaumata and his Magian followers in 522 BCE deliberated the appropriate manner of government for the Persian Empire:

Suppose, for the argument, that all three constitutions are of the very best – the best democracy, the best oligarchy, the best monarchy. I declare to you that, of these three at their best, monarchy is far superior. Nothing is manifestly better than the one best man. He will have judgment to match his excellence and will govern the Many blamelessly, and what measures he must devise against ill-doers will be wrapped in a similar well-judging silence. In an oligarchy, many try to practice virtue for the public good, but in so doing they engender bitter private enmities. Each of the oligarchs wants to be chief man and to win with his opinions, and so they come to great hatreds of one another, and from this comes fraction, and from fraction comes murder. From murder there is relapse to despotism – and *there* is an indication again how much despotism is the best! When the Many are rulers, it cannot but be that, again, knavery is bred in the state; but now the knaves do not grow to hate one another – they fast become friends. For they combine together to maladminister the public concerns. This goes on until one man takes charge of affairs for the Many and puts a stop to the knaves. As a result of this, he wins the admiration of the Many, and, being so admired, lo! you have your despot again; in this case, too, it is clear that monarchy is the best of the systems. In one word: from what source did we gain our freedom, and who gave it to us? The people, or the oligarchy, or the despot? I give my vote that, as we were freed by one man [Cyrus], so should we keep this freedom *through* one man.²²

The Diverse Origins and Mystical Aspects of Persian Kingship

Cyrus was fortunate in that he did not have to devise from scratch the template for the absolute monarchy that he sought to establish. Rather, he had recourse to the template left behind by the Assyrians, who had drawn upon nearly two thousand years of Mesopotamian royal traditions to develop a powerful and functional despotism. The legacy of Assyrian royalty manifests itself everywhere at Persepolis and Pasargadae, and based on the archaeological evidence at these and other Achaemenid sites, we know beyond all doubt that many aspects of Persian royal ideology and court protocol were modeled after Assyrian precedents. Certain aspects the Persians borrowed directly, for those Persian tribes that had migrated to southwestern Iran through the Zagros Mountains had endured centuries of direct contact with the lords of Nineveh. Other aspects, however, the Persians borrowed indirectly, from the Medes, Babylonians, and Elamites. In all events, the purpose was to implement rituals, rhetoric, and symbolism with which the inhabitants of the Near East were familiar, to impress upon them the signal authority of the new regime.²³



The seated king (Xerxes I) with the crown prince standing behind him. Each carries a lotus flower, symbol of immortality, in his left hand. The king grasps the royal scepter in his right hand, while the crown prince raises his right hand in the standard gesture of salute. Tall crowns and long beards were special prerogatives of those with a right to the throne.

Although it is difficult to trace the transmission of individual concepts or practices, the role of the Medes as cultural intermediaries appears to have been especially important. Astyages attempted to reform the Median government along Assyrian lines, and Median royal practices, as instituted at Astyages' court, are likely to have made an impression upon Cyrus. It is entirely possible that, during his tenure as crown prince of Media, Cyrus had helped plan Astyages' transformation of the Median monarchy. As emperor, Cyrus concerned himself with preserving and building upon the work begun by his grandfather. This

was the case even though Astyages' political reforms had disenchanted those members of the Median tribal aristocracy who had supported Cyrus during his revolt from 553 BCE to 550 BCE. As with other similarly situated kings, Cyrus' solution to the problem likely consisted of restoring the privileges of the disenfranchised aristocrats and granting them bureaucratic positions and estates within his own empire, all the while continuing Astyages' program of centralization.²⁴ It should come as no surprise, then, that the Old Persian term for "king" (*khshayathiya*, literally "one distinguished by a kingdom," Middle Persian *shah*) is a Median loan-word.²⁵ Median linguistic forms also occur in the Achaemenid royal titles "Great King" (*khshayathiya vazraka*) and "King of the Lands Containing All Kinds of Men" (*khshayathiya dahyunam vispazananam*).²⁶ Although the latter title is unattested before the reign of Darius I, its Median form suggests that it belonged to the official protocols of Cyrus and Astyages.²⁷

The kingly titles that the Persians ostensibly borrowed from the Medes clearly recall the Assyrian royal epithets of "Great King," "Mighty King," and "Leader of Widespread Peoples." Scholars have further identified as phonetically Median the titles of many offices within the Achaemenid bureaucracy. Because elements of this bureaucracy find close parallels within the earlier Assyrian administration, many scholars believe that the Achaemenid bureaucracy represented an expansion upon a system of government that the Medes had introduced to Iran in imitation of the Assyrian model. The linguistic evidence thus underscores the important role that the short-lived Median Empire played in transmitting

Assyrian royal ideals and administrative practices to the Persians.

The most memorable element of the Persian royal protocol was, of course, the title “King of Kings” (Old Persian *khshayathiya khshayathiyānam*, Middle Persian *shahanshah*), which was presumably also borrowed from the Medes.²⁸ The Medes seem to have adopted this title from either the Assyrians or, more probably, the Urartians, who, in turn, may have copied it from the Hittites.²⁹ The mystique attached to this title in Achaemenid times likely stemmed from the early Iranian ideal of an empire composed of several vassal kingdoms subservient to a single sovereign. The title probably also illustrated the supremacy of the Persian king vis-à-vis all past and present rulers and eventually embodied the very institution of monarchy in Iran.³⁰ Even today, Iranians refer to each of their ancient empires as a *shahanshahi*, or “king-of-kingship.”

Despite its disparate origins, the absolute monarchy that Cyrus founded resonated with the Iranians. If ever a nation could be identified with a certain form of government, it was Iran and monarchy. The Iranians traditionally recounted their history in terms of a successive line of kings – a principle aptly conveyed by the title of Ferdowsi’s legendary history, the *Shahnameh*, or “Book of Kings.” In Iran, the sovereign was always larger than life. The people blessed him with prayers and showered gifts upon him whenever he visited their settlements. The Roman author Aelian offers several charming anecdotes concerning this last custom. In particular, he recounts how, on one occasion, a poor Persian, surprised by the king’s unannounced arrival, had

nothing to offer and so ran as quickly as he could to a nearby stream, scooped up some water with his bare hands, and declared to his master: “King Artaxerxes, may your reign last forever! For the moment I honor you as best as I can; for you shall not, as far as lies within my power, go away without a gift of honor from me. With the water of the river . . . I show you my respect. But when you go to your camp, I will honor you with the best and most precious thing in my house, and I shall certainly not be inferior to any of the others who have already greeted you with presents.”³¹

As evidenced by the speech that he attributed to Darius I (see pages 258–259), Herodotus considered absolute monarchy to be consistent with the Persians’ “ancestral laws,” and in many ways, he was right. The rigid structure of early Persian society – within which each sociopolitical unit (house, clan, tribe) had a single dominant captain – made for an easy political transition from tribal politics to absolutism. Iranian belief in the *Farnah*, or Royal Glory, further solidified the monarch’s standing in the eyes of the people.³² The term *Farnah* does not appear in any Achaemenid inscriptions except as a component of personal names. However, the doctrine’s contribution to early Persian consciousness is clear. Veneration of the *Farnah* explains, in part, the great emphasis that the Persians placed upon the dynastic affiliations of their rulers, for the Iranians believed that – in addition to individuals – specific clans, tribes, and even nations could possess the *Farnah*.³³

Farnah motifs occur in the various Cyrus legends, most notably in the allegorical references to the Persian founder as a powerful boar, which animal

served as the principal avatar of the war god Verethragna, the deity responsible for bestowing the *Farnah* in the *Mihr Yasht*.[†] Even the legend of Achaemenes' nourishment by a golden eagle contains a thinly veiled reference to the *Farnah*, for birds of prey were believed to signify the presence of this force.³⁴ To the extent that Cyrus himself had a hand in propagating these legends, we may credit him with shrewdly exploiting the superstitious beliefs of the masses. After all, history has shown that the Iranians were quite willing to surrender themselves to a leader blessed with the *Farnah*, just as they were ready to depose one who clearly lacked it. Devotion to justice and success in battle represented the basic indicia of *Farnah* possession, and if the sources are to be believed, Cyrus displayed both qualities in abundance.[‡]

The notion that a supernatural aura distinguished the monarch from the rest of mankind provided the basis for the unique bond that existed between god and king in Persian royal ideology. The inscriptions of the later Achaemenids demonstrate that the Persian king presented himself as the chief agent through which Ahuramazda maintains *Arta*, or Order, throughout the world. Within these texts, everything that the king does is "by the favor of Ahuramazda," who raises the Persian king to power, confers empire upon him, and gives him the wisdom and vigor necessary to execute the god's will.³⁵ There was, of course, nothing new to the idea of the king receiving his mandate from heaven or assuming the mission statement of the empire's patron god. Such notions appear in the earliest inscriptions of Egyptian and Mesopotamian royalty. Closer to Cyrus' time, the

fundamental hallmark of Assyrian royal ideology was the role of the king as Ashur's earthly representative. Assyrian kings conquered and enslaved at Ashur's behest, and when they were not leveling enemy countries, they pleased Ashur by establishing peace and tranquility throughout their empire. However, the latter goal was always secondary to the former in the official rhetoric, because Ashur functioned primarily as a war god. The divine mandate of the Median kings was, in all likelihood, no different, for the *Mihr Yasht* reveals the chief god of the Median Empire to have been more terrible than merciful. By contrast, Ahuramazda was an altogether benevolent deity. His royal patrons accordingly did not relish the devastations of war in their inscriptions, even though royal ideology required the Persian king to be a good warrior and the empire took great pride in its sweeping conquests and bounty of brave men. We may find it frustrating that the Persians recorded their conquests largely in passing, thus depriving posterity of the graphic accounts of battles and campaigns that the Assyrians and other ancient peoples have left behind. However, this omission testifies to the Persians' desire to emphasize the benign aspects of their rule in a manner consistent with Zoroastrian religious beliefs.³⁶ Cyrus was thus more concerned to highlight in his Cylinder inscription the bloodless entry of his army into Babylon than the crushing defeat that he inflicted upon the Babylonian army at Opis.

Zoroastrian inspiration may also be claimed for Cyrus' outstanding patronage of foreign religions. We have already seen how Cyrus presented himself to the Babylonians as Marduk's chosen prince, and to the

Jews as Yahweh's anointed. In Ionia, the Persian king honored the god Apollo, through whose oracles he influenced local politics, and in Media, he presented himself as a Mithraic hero. Cambyses II and Darius I continued this practice of claiming support from local divinities by portraying themselves in Egypt as pharaohs born to the god Ra. Although imperial rhetoric had to be variegated in an empire seeking to encompass the "One World," the common thread in each domain was the union between royalty and divinity or, in the parlance of later times, "church and state." This policy was prudent, for most ancient Near Eastern religions tended to be nationalistic and temples enjoyed tremendous social standing. The Assyrians had followed a comparable policy of cult sponsorship, insofar as they occasionally paid homage to the gods of Babylonia and other Semitic lands.³⁷ However, their actions strike us as far less remarkable than those of the Persians, for many Babylonian and Semitic gods were, in fact, included within the Assyrian pantheon. Toward wholly foreign cults, the Assyrians, and also the Babylonians, took a harsher stance. They may have been indifferent to, or even mildly supportive of, such cults during peaceful times but often sought to eradicate them at the first hint of rebellion. The royal annals of the Assyrian kings thus contain many references to "godnappings" (a term coined to describe the removal of sacred images as punishment for the god's devotees), and in conquered territories formally organized into provinces, these rulers imposed the cults of Ashur and other Assyrian deities.³⁸ Cyrus' policy of religious tolerance consequently marked a new and refreshing political development in the Near East. It was, moreover,

consistent with Zoroastrian principles, inasmuch as the ultimate goal was to promote stable government and bring *Arta*, or Order, to the world.

The King as Terrible, Merciful, and Giving

One potentially dangerous consequence of the king's elevated status as the representative of the gods was the tendency to demonize his opponents, particularly recalcitrant subjects, as spiritually vile. This principle manifests itself most clearly in the Bisutun Inscription, which employs Zoroastrian terminology to denigrate Darius' enemies as "Liars." That Cyrus employed similar rhetoric seems highly probable in light of Ctesias' claim that the Persian conqueror had Spitamas, Astyages' heir apparent at the time of the Persian revolt, put to death for "lying" about the Median king's whereabouts.³⁹ As the later history of the Persian Empire demonstrates, equating civil misconduct with religious impiety justified the merciless treatment of both political rivals and casual felons.⁴⁰ Royal justice could be harsh, and the king was expected to punish all those at fault. Xenophon proudly recounts how Cyrus the Younger suffered no "criminals and evil-doers to mock his authority" and that "his punishments were exceptionally severe," such that "along the more frequented roads one often saw people who had been blinded or had had their feet or hands cut off"; but he also notes that "anyone, whether Greek or native, who was doing no harm could travel without fear wherever he liked and could take with him whatever he wanted."⁴¹

References to Cyrus the Great's chastisement of brigands and other felons are scarce, but he reportedly espoused the same ideal as his future namesake – that is, the desire to repay those who did good or evil to him with interest. We would thus be exceedingly naïve to think that the Persian founder never consigned anyone to the frightful punishments so common in antiquity. The ancient world was a violent place, and criminals in the Persian Empire suffered lashes or bodily mutilation for even the mildest offences. The Persians were no different in this than other ancient peoples, including the Greeks. Yet, legal historians may find it interesting that whereas Semitic tribes generally punished criminals by crushing their bones, the Iranians cut off ears, noses, and limbs. Punishments were most severe when the king's prestige or an important ideological issue was at stake. Hence, pretenders to the throne and those who broke their allegiance to the king had to be cruelly tormented. Failure to do so not only cast doubt on the king's ability to mete out justice, but also deprived the sovereign of the all-important opportunity to set an example. Among Cyrus' known rivals, Spitamas and Pactyes may have suffered particularly violent deaths at the conqueror's hands. § As the Bisutun Inscription makes plain, executions specially ordered by the king often took place outside the city gates "so all the people could see."⁴²

On the whole, Cyrus was more lenient than other ancient rulers, especially toward foreign political leaders, whom he made it customary to spare. His greatest contribution in matters of crime and punishment involved introducing chivalry to warfare and putting an end to the notion that all foreign

adversaries were necessarily criminals, as well. Indeed, Herodotus praised Cyrus and his successors for routinely treating enemy kings with magnanimity and granting governorships to their sons.⁴³ The Halicarnassian historian also marveled at Persian humanitarianism toward enemy combatants who distinguished themselves in battle.⁴⁴ We have discussed in detail Cyrus' merciful treatment of the various populations that he subdued. His benevolence toward the laity stands in sharp contrast to the much publicized approach of the Assyrians – who routinely maimed, deported, or massacred civilian populations in the territories they conquered – as well as that of the Babylonians and Medes. Again, Zoroastrian religious principles may explain the mighty conqueror's disposition in this regard.

As the intermediary between gods and men, the Persian king had to prove himself as generous and giving to his subjects. This ideal motivated the Persian ruler in the Book of Esther to respond to all requests for favors with the formulaic declaration: “What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.”⁴⁵ Another custom dictated that once a year on the king's birthday each Persian noble could ask for a boon, which the king had to grant.⁴⁶ The sources often mention the king lavishing gifts upon those who distinguished themselves in his service. Among the most coveted prizes were robes of honor, ceremonial weapons, and golden drinking cups. These the king routinely distributed to those who fought bravely in battle, raised the most sons, cultivated the finest fruits, or prepared the best dishes for his table. A select few even received provincial governorships or the hands of royal princesses in marriage. For

example, Cyrus arranged for his sister to marry Oebaras and made the latter satrap of Media in recognition of excellent services rendered during the war with the Medes. Gobryas likewise became satrap and Harpagus a regiment commander, while the Greek Pytharchus, who had befriended Cyrus in Sardis, received the tribute from seven Ionian cities.⁴⁷ Based upon the actions of the later Persian kings, we may even be certain that Cyrus compensated the survivors of those nobles who sacrificed their lives for the empire.⁴⁸

All this was part of the king's duty to his *bandaka*. The precise meaning of this Old Persian term remains disputed. Some scholars interpret it to mean "slaves," whereas others define it as something more akin to "dependents" or "faithful." The difference is perhaps illusory, for most slaves in the ancient world enjoyed rights exceeding those of their recent counterparts in Europe and America. All the empire's inhabitants were considered the king's *bandaka*, and just as it was incumbent upon them to do the king's bidding "by night and by day," so was the king obliged to care for them and to reward their good deeds.⁴⁹ The Persian king was very much, to quote Second Isaiah, "the Lord's shepherd," and Xenophon goes so far as to state that Cyrus had once remarked that the duties of a good king and good shepherd are alike, inasmuch as a good shepherd only derives benefit from his flocks if they are happy and well kept.⁵⁰

Imperial Administration and High-Level Bureaucracy

To give cohesion to his empire, Cyrus needed a firm administration with clearly defined political offices and chains of command. Astyages had set about developing such a government toward the end of his reign, and Cyrus continued his grandfather's work, making sure, however, to incorporate the administrative tactics of other conquered peoples, such as the Babylonians and Elamites, who were organizationally more advanced than the Medes.

During the early Achaemenid period, the second and third men in the empire were known as the Royal Spear-Bearer and the Royal Bow-Bearer. Their exact functions are unknown, but their places in the hierarchy are certain. They are the only officials that Darius I mentions in his tomb inscription, and Herodotus presents the Royal Spear-Bearer named in that inscription, Gobryas the Patischorian, as Darius' right-hand man. Later sources mention the commander of the Royal Bodyguard, the vaunted *Hazarapati* (literally, "Commander of a Thousand," Middle Persian *Hazarbed*), as the chief officer of the imperial court.⁵¹ If the bowing dignitary wearing Median dress in the Persepolis reliefs does not represent a noble Mede but instead the *Hazarapati*, as most scholars think, then we must wonder whether the *Hazarapati* and Royal Spear-Bearer were identical, for the two never appear together in the same portrait.⁵² A more explicit dichotomy between title and role occurs in the case of the Royal Bow-Bearer. Aspathines, son of Prexaspes, appears at Naqsh-e Rostam as Darius' Bow-Bearer, carrying also the king's battle-ax.⁵³ Yet, the Persepolis Fortification Tablets name him as the chief administrative officer of the

royal chancellery beginning in Darius' twenty-eighth year (494 BCE).⁵⁴ It is therefore possible that the titles "Royal Spear-Bearer" and "Royal Bow-Bearer" referred to strictly ceremonial offices held on special occasions.⁵⁵ Such a custom existed in medieval Europe, where, for instance, the King of Bohemia served as the Holy Roman Emperor's Arch Cup-Bearer during important state functions.[¶] Other honorary attendants of the Persian king who enjoyed the privilege of close physical proximity to the monarch included the Royal Message-Bearer, the Royal Cup-Bearer, the Royal Charioteer, the Royal Armor-Bearer, and the Bearer of the Royal Footstool.⁵⁶ They, too, were typically descended from the highest ranks of the Iranian nobility. These elite aristocrats formed the main consultative body that advised the king on important matters. This council is mentioned in the Book of Esther, which tells of the "wise men" of Persia and Media, "who, according to the custom of the kings, were always near the [king's] person . . . who knew the laws and judgments of their forefathers."⁵⁷

After this upper echelon of officers came the imperial satraps. The latter presided over the empire's provinces, or satrapies. The post of satrap must have existed within the Median Empire, for Greek *satrapes* does not derive from Old Persian *khshassapavan* (literally, "protector of the empire"), but from Median **khshathrapavan*. We may therefore infer that, in dividing his empire into satrapies, Cyrus imitated the example of the Medes, who, in turn, had followed the Assyrian practice of calling upon specially appointed officials to govern territories that had been formally annexed as provinces. During the late Achaemenid period, the imperial satraps were almost exclusively

Persians, related by blood or marriage to the king. However, Cyrus regularly granted satrapies to Medes and, at least on one occasion (in the case of the Babylonian traitor Gobryas), to a non-Iranian.

We can assemble a list of Cyrus' satrapies based on scattered references in the sources. The wealthiest satrapy included Babylonia and Abarnahara (literally, "Across the River," the lands beyond the Euphrates as far as the Mediterranean Sea and Arabian Desert); this satrapy corresponded geographically to the area occupied by the Neo-Babylonian Empire on the eve of the Persian conquest. The second satrapy, officially called "Media" (or "Gutium" in the Babylonian scribal literature), seems to have covered the entire northwest of the Iranian plateau, as well as the lands to the east of the Tigris in Assyria and countries further north. Gobryas presided over Babylonia and Abarnahara from 539 BCE to 524 BCE, and Oebaras over the Median satrapy, presumably from 550 BCE until his death in 539 BCE. Lydia and Ionia constituted a third satrapy, which encompassed most, if not all, of the former territories of Croesus' empire. Cyrus initially placed this satrapy under the command of Tabalus but at a later date assigned it to the Persian Oroetes.⁵⁸ Whether Cyrus separated from the Lydian satrapy Hellespontine Phrygia, which Herodotus recognized as having its own satrap under Cambyzes, is unknown but not unlikely.⁵⁹ In the distant east, both Ctesias and the Bisutun Inscription mention Bactria as the administrative center of an important satrapy, which existed before Darius' accession. The impression one gets from these and other sources is that, throughout the Achaemenid period, the Bactrian satrap governed all the subject peoples who lived to the north of the

Hindu Kush Mountains, including the nomadic tribes of the Central Asian steppe. The satrap of Arachosia, the other great warden in the distant east, seems to have held perennial sway over the lands to the south of this great mountain range. More centrally located, but still in the east, was the satrapy of Parthia and Hyrcania. These were former Median provinces that Cyrus apparently felt should be governed by Median princes.⁶⁰ According to Herodotus, Persia itself was technically not a satrapy, because its people were unconquered and did not pay tribute.⁶¹ This statement is difficult to reconcile with the information in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which demonstrate the existence of a structured provincial administration in Persia proper. Although the chief officer of this administration did not carry the title “satrap,” he seems to have fulfilled a similar civil role, such that Persia should be considered, at minimum, an unofficial satrapy.⁶²



Fourth century BCE sculpture from Asia Minor showing a Persian satrap seated on a throne. His tall headgear and scepter signify his high rank.

This leaves room on the map for additional satrapies in Elam and Cappadocia, which, according to Ctesias, a Persian satrap governed during the first decade of Darius' reign.⁶³ Armenia, where we should expect another satrapy to have been located, may have been ruled by vassal kings at this early stage or, as Xenophon implies, incorporated either in whole or in part within the Median satrapy.⁶⁴ The Persepolis Fortification Tablets mention other satrapies in Areia, Gedrosia, and Maka, but it is unclear whether these satrapies existed at the time of Cyrus.⁶⁵ It is possible

that they were secondary provinces, the heads of which took orders from the satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania (in the case of Areia) or the satrap of Arachosia (in the cases of Gedrosia and Maka).^{**} It is also uncertain whether the region of Maka referenced in these archives was located in present-day Makran or Oman. Vassal kingdoms, such as Cilicia and the Phoenician city-states, did not have satraps placed over them, although they tendered tribute and, when necessary, soldiers.

What were the satrap's responsibilities? To answer this question, we must first discuss the use of the term "satrap" in the royal inscriptions. At Bisutun, Darius names at most only three satraps: his father, Hystaspes, satrap or military commander of Parthia and Hyrcania; Vivana, satrap of Arachosia; and Dadarshish, satrap of Bactria. Each played a vital military role in quelling local insurrections. Given this evidence, and also what we know from the Babylonian and Greek texts about the satraps' preoccupation with tax collection and law enforcement, it is tempting to think of the satraps as governor-generals. Such a characterization would be appropriate for the most part. However, Darius never speaks of any satrap as the local administrator of a province and, instead, refers to each as "my satrap in [country X]."⁶⁶ Darius' choice of words implies that the satraps were, first and foremost, the personal representatives of the king whose main responsibility was to uphold the prestige of the monarchy. This notion finds support in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which show satraps controlling troops and handling other assignments outside their provinces.⁶⁷ Recognizing that the satraps were primarily agents of the crown – and "not

necessarily or not only ‘governors’ – explains the extreme deference to the king’s name that, according to the Greeks, these officers and their retainers showed at all times.⁶⁸ This recognition also provides the appropriate context for Xenophon’s anecdote that Cyrus ordered “all the satraps he sent out to imitate him in everything they saw him do.”⁶⁹ As the principal representatives of the royal authority, the satraps had to cloak themselves in some of the same majesty as the king. Satrapal courts were thus modeled after the royal court, and just as young Persian aristocrats back home received their education at the “king’s gate,” so, too, did the sons of Persian settlers in the provinces hasten to the satraps’ palaces for training in horsemanship, archery, and truthful speech.

Preventing rebellions and reminding the inhabitants of the empire’s wild parts about the king’s authority comprised an essential part of the satrap’s duties. To accomplish these objectives, the satrap needed access to soldiers, which the king granted him. Herodotus provides that Oroetes, who served as satrap of Lydia under Cyrus and Cambyses, had a personal bodyguard of 1,000 Persian spearmen, and Oroetes’ successor, Artaphernes, raised ships and troops enough from his satrapy to battle the Asiatic Greeks and their allies during the Ionian Revolt. The core of the satrapal forces usually consisted of Iranian, and specifically Persian, colonists who received estates from the king. These colonists had to supply set numbers of soldiers to the satrap based on the sizes of their estates. In addition, the satraps regularly called upon native landowners and political leaders to provide troops. They also had the authority to draw soldiers from allied tribes and states located beyond

the empire's borders.⁷⁰ With such forces in tow, the satraps could quell insurrections, clear the empire's major highways of hostile bandits, and command the allegiance of the local chieftains whose cooperation was necessary to maintain Persian rule.

The satraps also collected taxes and other tribute (Old Persian *baji*) for the king. Herodotus claims that Darius was the first Persian ruler to fix the empire's annual tax levy for each satrapy, whereas Cyrus and Cambyses had contented themselves to receive "gifts" from their subjects.⁷¹ However, Herodotus' testimony regarding the primitiveness of the tax system before Darius is difficult to accept. Governments have always funded themselves through taxation, and the Assyrians had used censuses and property assessments to accurately fix the amounts of tribute that their subjects had to pay. For their part, Cyrus and Cambyses could hardly have failed to employ such techniques, at least in the west. So what made Darius' reforms noteworthy? One, they laid the groundwork for gradually abolishing the old practice of accepting tribute in kind in favor of fixed payments of silver; and two, his reforms followed a rigorous survey of all the empire's arable lands, including records of past yields.⁷² The latter task must have taken many years to complete, especially in the eastern satrapies where it was almost certainly unprecedented. What Darius did based on this survey was to estimate the maximum annual yield of each tax district and to set the tax requirement at exactly half that amount.⁷³ As Cook has observed, the new system did not fully protect against "the rapacity of provincial governors and Persian grandees," but it "removed the temptation for a governor to extort the highest possible tribute in order

to win favor or preferment from the King.”⁷⁴

Darius' actions thus shed light upon the tax system that existed under Cyrus. It is worth noting that Herodotus probably had in mind only the land tax (Old Persian **haraka*) in his discussion of Darius' administrative reforms. Because land remained the greatest measure of wealth in the Near East, the land tax was the most important tax and remained so well into the Islamic period, when the term **haraka* was incorporated into Arabic as *kharaj*. However, Achaemenid-period sources enumerate other taxes including harbor fees, road tolls, and sales and income taxes. Another “tax,” which did not entail the payment of money or kind but which satraps could demand, was corvée labor, whereby the occupants of certain localities were required to work on government projects such as the maintenance of roads or canals. According to the Cyrus Cylinder, the Persian conqueror exempted a segment of Babylon's population from corvée duty. But other evidence indicates that the Persians made heavy corvée demands upon both urban households and agricultural workers.⁷⁵ The organization of labor teams for participation in palace-building projects on the Iranian plateau is well attested in the sources and may be counted as another duty of the satraps. In this connection, the sources indicate that, during the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses, Babylonian temples and financial institutions arranged for local laborers to travel across the Zagros to work on the construction of palaces in the vicinity of Persepolis and Taoce by the Persian Gulf.⁷⁶ As palace-life and the institution of slavery became more entrenched in Iran, the satraps also forwarded eunuchs and slaves to the king as a

form of tribute.⁷⁷

As some of the king's chief men, the imperial satraps were very well compensated. Given the substantial wealth and military resources that the satraps commanded, a functional system of checks and balances was necessary to ensure their loyalty. Cyrus appointed special officers, known as the "King's Eyes" (Old Persian **spasaka*) and "Ears" (Old Persian **gaushaka*), to inspect the activities of the satraps and their subordinates for the crown. A late fifth century BCE Aramaic papyrus from Egypt mentions a **gaushaka* bringing judges and policemen to investigate a corrupt praetorian's dealings at the request of a beleaguered community.⁷⁸ The context of this reference has spurred speculation that the King's Ear functioned as an inspector general or state's attorney "who represented the central government in legal cases."⁷⁹ More notorious, at least in Greek imagination, were the King's Eyes. An educated guess in the absence of direct evidence is that these officials oversaw the imperial intelligence service. Espionage has always existed, and the Assyrians kept special spies, called the "troops of the (king's) feet," whose leader was often the crown prince.⁸⁰ The best evidence that Cyrus maintained such spies is, again, linguistic. The title **spasaka* is phonetically Median, thus implying the continuation of a bureaucratic office that had existed under the Medes.⁸¹

Another guarantee against satrapal insubordination involved formal curtailments of the satraps' military and civil authority. From Xenophon's confusing testimony on the matter, we may infer that, at some point during the Achaemenid period, the kings entrusted the empire's main garrisons to officers

who answered directly to the crown, rather than to the satraps in whose territories the fortresses were located.⁸² Some scholars attribute this division of authority to Darius, but there is no compelling reason to do so, given that, even before Darius, the chief treasurers and secretaries of the satrapies took their orders directly from the king.†

Occasionally, the king appointed regional commanders whose authority transcended that of several neighboring satraps. One such officer was the *karanos*, or “leader of peoples.” As Xenophon explains, the *karanos* was “vested with full powers,” meaning complete civil and military jurisdiction over the local satraps, garrison commanders, treasurers, and chancellery officials. Given his overarching authority, the *karanos* usually hailed from the king’s innermost circle of confidants and was only sent on special assignments. Thus, Cyrus the Younger, a royal prince, received his appointment as *karanos* in 407 BCE for the express purpose of settling the Peloponnesian War in favor of Sparta, and Harpagus the Mede presumably carried the title *karanos* during his campaigns against the Asiatic Greeks between 544 BCE and 540 BCE (see page 117).

Monumental Inscriptions and Imperial Chancellery

Monumental inscriptions were written in Elamite, Akkadian, and Old Persian cuneiform, with the same inscription often carved in each of the three languages side by side. Cyrus may well have devised the Old Persian alphabet, as Richard Hallock has suggested,

but the number of scribes competent in this script seems to have been quite low, even under Darius.⁸³ It would seem that the Old Persian and Elamite versions of the inscriptions were drafted on the spot as the king recited the words, whereas the Akkadian version was translated from Elamite. Direct communications to subject peoples were transmitted in local dialects in the manner described by the Book of Esther: “Then the king’s secretaries were summoned . . . and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king’s satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of the King Ahaseurus [either Xerxes or Artaxerxes] and sealed with the king’s rings. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces”⁸⁴



Trilingual inscription from Pasargadae carved in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian. The Old Persian text reads: *Adam Kurush Khshayathiya Hakhamanishiya* (“I am Cyrus, the king, an Achaemenid”).

Recordkeeping was essential in an empire as vast and sophisticated as Cyrus’. Because the Persians

lacked a native tradition of written literature, they wisely deferred to the customs of their literate subjects on the matter. With a few exceptions, the Persepolis Fortification Tablets were drafted in Elamite.⁸⁵ A typical Tablet contains the following record of a government transaction:

Tell Arshina the chief of workers, that Farnaka [the chief officer of the chancellery] spoke as follows: 5 fowls are to be issued to Mazdayazna, the Maraphian. Let him maintain them in pasture at Persepolis as part of the royal stores. In the 21st year [of Darius, 501 BCE], seventh month, on the 3rd day, this sealed document was delivered. Shakhshabanush wrote the text. He received the instruction from Nanitin.⁸⁶

Although the Persepolis Fortification Tablets belong to the reign of Darius, recent studies indicate that Cyrus and Cambyses implemented an identical recordkeeping system in the Persian homeland and its surroundings.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Arrian's statement that the Magi who kept watch over Cyrus' tomb received for themselves a daily allowance of sheep, wine, and flour accords very well with the information in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which document the payment of similar rations to individuals on the imperial payroll.⁸⁸

The scribes who drafted the overwhelming majority of the Tablets were bilingual and seem to have inscribed these texts using Persian loan-words and grammatical styles in such a way that they could easily read the texts back to monolingual Persian officials in Persian.⁸⁹ Of course, Elamite and other cuneiform scripts were designed for writing on clay and stone and were thus becoming obsolete for bookkeeping purposes. Parchment proved easier to work with and a better alternative for recordkeeping.

Aramaic was written in a cursive script well suited for paper and had become the *lingua franca* of Mesopotamia thanks to the widespread dispersion of Aramaean tribes during the Assyrian period. The Old Testament demonstrates that Cyrus' chancellery also used Aramaic, and this had far-reaching ramifications in Iran and India, where it gave rise to the development of written Pahlavi and Kharoshthi, both of which featured the use of Aramaic scripts to record native languages. The Book of Ezra mentions a document archive at Ecbatana and the Persepolis Fortification Tablets refer to various repositories in Persia.⁹⁰ The Persepolis region served as the central archive in the imperial heartland, perhaps as early as Cyrus' reign, and the Tablets mention an intricate system of record transfers from satellite offices to the central archive that must have been imitated elsewhere.⁹¹

Accountants played an important role in the royal and satrapal chancelleries. It is fair to assume that Cyrus and his officers pushed the new generation of Persians to understand the financial and economic workings of the empire. Despite their cultural predilection against commercial transactions, the Persians quickly developed a knack for business. Cambyses maintained extensive dealings with local banks and temples during his co-regency in Babylon, and documents detailing the sophisticated transactions entered into by later princes have been found in Egypt, Asia Minor, and elsewhere. Darius, in particular, was a skilled businessman, for which reason the Persians jokingly nicknamed him the royal "bean-counter."⁹²

Under Cyrus (and before the full implementation

of Darius' fiscal reforms), workers' salaries and day-to-day transactions were paid almost exclusively in rations or in kind. Such transactions represented the norm in many lands and among peasants and laborers everywhere. Only in Mesopotamia and western Asia Minor were merchants accustomed to dealing with money. The earliest coins were produced in Babylonia, so merchants everywhere employed Babylonian terminology. Thus, Levantines, Lydians, and Greeks all dealt in bronze and silver *biltu* (Greek "talent"), *shiqilu* (Hebrew "shekel," Greek "siglos"), *mana* (Greek "mina"), and "Ishtar Heads" (Greek "stater"). Regional differences in the composition, weight, and purity of these coins presented major obstacles to trade. Herodotus attributed to Darius the issuance of a standard currency, the *daric*, a highly refined gold coin stamped with the image of the king armed with bow and spear.⁹³ Darius also minted a new line of silver *sigloi*, also impressed with the royal portrait. In practice, Darius' coins were of limited circulation. As with the Lydians before them, the Persians only released new issues to attract foreign labor and to cover wartime expenses, with *darics* funding the army and *sigloi* the navy.⁹⁴ But Darius' coins served an important purpose by setting the standards for purity and weight used by local mints. In his monetary reforms as in almost everything else, Darius looked to past precedent. The Lydian Croesus had been the first ruler to issue coins in both gold and silver, and as Cyrus' reign spanned much of the gap between Croesus and Darius, the Persian founder may have made some important contributions of his own in the field of coinage. Archaeologists have discovered hordes of "Croesids" that are less heavy than the coins

unequivocally attributed to Croesus and that are closer in weight and purity to the first *darics*. These likely date to Cyrus' time. It could be that Darius simply perfected Cyrus' policy on coinage. It is hard to imagine Cyrus overlooking monetary matters given his frequent deliberations with the fiscally minded Croesus.⁹⁵ In any event, the Achaemenid period witnessed an unprecedented increase in the use of coins, both within the empire and, as a result of its dealings with foreign entities, abroad. The shift toward money as a standard of exchange signified a major development with obvious and far-reaching implications.⁹⁶

The Quality of Persian Rule

In administering their empire, Cyrus and his successors generally maintained pre-existing governmental structures intact in the provinces and limited their dealings to only the upper echelons of local societies. One recent study has used the term "political decapitation" to describe the Persian practice of removing from power only the heads of state in conquered territories.⁹⁷ In view of this approach, cooperation with native officials was critical to Persian imperial success. Unlike many other conquerors, the Persians showed a respect for, and an interest in, the cultures of the various nations they ruled. Cook has shown that Persian administrators established special consultative bodies comprised of regional experts who advised them on local matters.⁹⁸ The goal was to facilitate Persian rule in a manner consistent with local traditions and the objectives of

the king. In this sense, the Persian Empire operated almost as a federalism.⁹⁹

A brief survey of how Cyrus and his successors implemented this “federalist” system in the conquered territories will enable us to judge its merits. In Babylonia, Cyrus kept in power Rimut and Zeriya, two important officials of Nabonidus mentioned in the Verse Account. He also preserved the office of *shakin mati*, or “administrator of the countries.” Under Nabonidus, the *shakin mati* had served as the chief civil officer of the Babylonian bureaucracy, functioning almost like a grand vizier. The cuneiform tablets indicate that a certain Nabu-ahhe-bullit (formerly one of Nabonidus’ district governors) held this post until at least Cyrus’ fourth year as ruler of Mesopotamia (535 BCE).¹⁰⁰ This individual ostensibly served as the highest-ranking subordinate of the satrap Gobryas and must have played a critical role in managing relations between the satrap and regional governors to ensure political continuity on the local level.

Cyrus did not interfere substantially with the internal administration of the Babylonian temples. These powerful institutions served as the premiere organs of local government and exercised tremendous feudal authority as the owners of most of the country’s arable land. Babylonian temples were also fabulously wealthy and engaged in large-scale money-lending operations.¹⁰¹ Some reshuffling of temple personnel did occur in the immediate aftermath of the Persian conquest, but that was usual whenever new kings came to power.¹⁰² Cyrus’ temple appointees were mostly Babylonians descended from recognized “temple families” that had previously supplied priests

or administrative personnel to temple boards. So business went on as usual – for the most part. However, Cyrus did perpetuate a pattern, which had begun under Nabonidus and his predecessors, of strengthening the crown and limiting the resources of the temples. He terminated the longstanding practice of offering prisoners of war to temples as slaves and used temple laborers for governmental projects.¹⁰³ He also ceased payments of tithes from the royal treasury. The Babylonian tithe was a mandatory payment or tax required of anyone who cultivated temple land or lived in close proximity to a temple. Cyrus, furthermore, subjected temple boards, which had previously enjoyed the right of unfettered self-governance, to the oversight of the satrap Gobryas and levied substantial financial assessments from temple treasuries. Beginning in his reign, a greater portion of the temples' income was allocated to the "King's Cash Box."¹⁰⁴ A similar increase in royal allocations had occurred in Babylonia under Nabonidus, whose reign witnessed inflation and constant feuding between temple administrators and the crown.¹⁰⁵ Cyrus' demands for greater financial contributions thus marked the continuation of a pre-existing trend aimed at increasing profits to the crown derived from agricultural operations on temple lands. However, impingements of this kind must have seemed minor in light of the other possible consequences of a change in imperial regime and, therefore, met with little or no resistance; the Babylonian temples hardly lost any of their considerable prestige, and there is no record of political unrest in Babylonia during Cyrus' reign.

The Mesopotamian evidence further sheds light upon the positive impact that Persian rule had on

Babylonian legal institutions. The law had a different connotation in ancient times than today and subsumed matters of culture and religion in addition to statutory interpretation. For Persian rule to work, the king and his satraps needed a clear understanding of the relevant laws and traditions of their subjects. The system required that, once reviewed and approved by the Persians, the laws of a given locality be codified and incorporated into the overarching “king’s law,” which sustained the empire and determined one’s loyalty to the state. The great lawgiver among the Persian emperors was, of course, Darius, whom the Greeks and Egyptians remembered as such.¹⁰⁶ However, Cyrus was also concerned with local legal traditions, as apparent from the frequent references in Babylonian records to “the judges of Cyrus, King of Babylonia, King of the Lands” and of “Gobryas, satrap of Babylonia and Across the River.”¹⁰⁷ All the royal judges attested in Babylonia under Cyrus and Cambyses were native Babylonians, and several of them had served in the same capacity during Nabonidus’ reign.¹⁰⁸ Under Darius, Iranians began to infiltrate the ranks of the local judiciary. However, these foreign justices seem to have had exclusive jurisdiction over only the most important cases, such as those involving charges of treason.¹⁰⁹ The legal codes of Hammurabi and the Chaldean kings thus continued to be implemented in Achaemenid Babylonia, and it has even been claimed that Babylonian law, the most advanced throughout the Near East, reached its pinnacle during the Persian period, when it spread to neighboring lands and influenced other legal systems, including the Jewish one.¹¹⁰

Many peoples of Syria and the Levant, including the Jews, had suffered greatly under Babylonian domination and, therefore, espoused a favorable view of Persian rule. From the Persians' perspective, the most important Levantine nations were Phoenicia and Cilicia, both of which enjoyed complete local autonomy, at least until the end of the fifth century BCE. Whereas the Babylonians failed to recognize the potential benefits that would accrue to them through mastery of the Levant, the Persians were particularly accommodating of the Phoenicians, whose navy they used for maritime ventures. Thus, Cambyses abandoned his plans to conquer Carthage, a Phoenician colony located along the Mediterranean coast of Tunisia, when his Phoenician vassals refused to participate in the campaign, declaring that it would be inappropriate for parents to make war upon their children.¹¹¹ Cambyses' leniency in this matter was remarkable and reflective of a previous arrangement, probably entered into by Cyrus, whereby the Phoenicians received authorization to administer four miniature "empires within an empire" in the southwest quadrant of the Achaemenid realm.¹¹² Pursuant to this arrangement, the Persians bequeathed to the leading Phoenician city-states of Sidon, Tyre, Aradus, and Byblos practically all the major coastal settlements between southern Syria and Gaza.¹¹³ The later Achaemenids even encouraged these city-states to federate and, to this end, established a pan-Phoenician council in the harbor-town of Tripolis.¹¹⁴ For his part, Cyrus evinced respect for the Phoenicians by adorning the figure of the four-winged guardian at Pasargadae with a *hem-hem* crown. Though of Egyptian origin, this crown was a special cult symbol

of Baal, the chief deity of the Phoenician pantheon. This suggests that Cyrus recognized Baal as an important regional divinity, whose attributes merited incorporation into Achaemenid art.¹¹⁵ However, the Persian conqueror probably condemned the notorious child sacrifices performed at Tyre in honor of the underworld god Moloch, the Phoenician equivalent of the Babylonian deity Nergal.¹¹⁶

The Arabs of southern Mesopotamia and the northwestern quadrant of the Arabian Peninsula had the status of free allies of the Persian king, even though they sent him yearly gifts and supplied soldiers for his armies. The Arabian frontier must have been of considerable importance to the Achaemenids, given that nomadic tribes from the region had repeatedly ravaged Mesopotamia and other parts of the Fertile Crescent during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The Assyrians had attempted to abate this menace by occasionally overstepping the boundaries of their empire and engaging the nomads militarily on their own terrain. But the difficulties of campaigning in open desert country made this approach only partially successful, as was the case with Nabonidus' costly attempt at a full-fledged conquest of the Arabian Peninsula. Cyrus' practical solution to the problem was to empower as king one of the tribal sheikhs whose territory overlapped with the important trade routes leading to and from the Hijaz and to charge this sheikh with policing and keeping in check his nomadic neighbors.¹¹⁷ This same tactic was employed centuries later with equal success by the Roman and Sasanid Empires, each of which buffered its desert frontier by enlisting the support of a particular Arab tribe.¹¹⁸

The situation in Elam is less clear, as scholarly opinion is divided regarding the circumstances under which the country passed to Persian rule. However, the names of the Elamite leaders mentioned in the Bisutun inscription support the notion that Cyrus and Cambyses might have ruled the country through vassal kings, who enjoyed considerable local autonomy.

In the east, Cyrus and his successors ruled hegemonically by maintaining native kings and tribal chieftains in power, such that when Alexander marched through the satrapies of “Upper Asia” over two centuries later, he found a cohesive network of Persian and local leaders arrayed against him.¹¹⁹ According to Vogelsang, the unique geopolitical and demographic landscape of the eastern satrapies forced the Persians, like the British after them, to rely heavily upon local strongmen to preserve their suzerainty.¹²⁰ Just as the British paid subsidies to their Afghan allies in return for the latter’s nominal recognition of British rule, so too, in Vogelsang’s opinion, did the Persians support with arms and money influential local dynasts, who could raise tribute and troops at the behest of the imperial satraps. As Plutarch recognized, the Persian kings always had in mind the condition of the so-called “Upper Satrapies,” which served as their main base of support outside of Persia and Media. One important consequence of Persian rule in the east that should not go unmentioned pertains to the Achaemenid habit of governing neighboring tribes from suitable control centers, such as Bactra, Maracanda, and Cyropolis. This had the beneficial effect over time of conditioning the otherwise freebooting inhabitants of these parts to structured

political rule.

As the Persians' imperial partners, the Medes continued to be the dominant nation in the northern half of the Iranian plateau. Councils of Median nobles appear to have convened as late as the reign of Alexander.¹²¹ Furthermore, Herzfeld has argued that, like Astyages, Cyrus and Cambyses appointed the Magi to serve as local magistrates across Media, thereby entrusting them with principal oversight of all matters related to agricultural labor.¹²² What is clear is that the Medes lost some of their status in consequence of their attempted revolts against Darius in 522–521 BCE.¹²³ But the unity between the two leading imperial peoples was never broken. Darius' successors held firm to the title “King of Persia and Media” in their Babylonian inscriptions.¹²⁴ Moreover, one of the most important religious developments of the Achaemenid period, Artaxerxes II's public recognition of Mithra and Anahita alongside Ahuramazda as the chief gods of state, has been interpreted as an attempt to accommodate Median interests in the official religion of the Achaemenid Empire.‡

The situation in Armenia largely mirrored that in Media, which is not surprising given the close historical ties between the Medes and Armenians and the fact that the two nations may have formed part of the same administrative unit under Cyrus and Cambyses. The Armenian national epic remembers Cyrus as having maintained in power a dynasty of native vassal kings of Saka origin that had previously owed allegiance to the Medes.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the Bisutun Inscription has been interpreted to demonstrate the presence, during the early years of

Persian rule, of local dynasts who upheld Achaemenid interests.¹²⁶ Farther west, in Cappadocia, which spanned much of eastern Asia Minor, local authority seems to have remained in the hands of the same petty kings and tribal chieftains whom the Medes had raised to power at the beginning of the sixth century BCE.¹²⁷ However, the dearth of reliable information concerning conditions immediately before and after Cyrus' conquest precludes any meaningful discussion of the transition to Persian rule.¹²⁸

It has been speculated regarding western Asia Minor that Cyrus envisioned a ruling triumvirate of Persians, Medes, and Lydians in the immediate aftermath of his victory over Croesus, but that the disastrous Pactyes affair convinced him to exclude the Lydians as imperial partners.¹²⁹ The Persian policy of political continuity manifested itself within Lydia through the sustained operation of Croesus' royal mint and the local authority of the Mermnad house, which managed the country's lucrative farming and mining industries for at least several generations after the Persian conquest.¹³⁰ Elsewhere in western Asia Minor, native dynasts continued in power in Caria and Lycia, where a redistribution of fiefdoms near Xanthus occurred in the wake of Harpagus' bloody conquest. That these rulers adopted elements of Persian dress and court protocol indicates that they were in close contact with the satrap of Lydia, with whom they had a relationship of mutual cooperation and support.

Persian rule was, of course, less happily received among the Asiatic Greeks.¹³¹ The Ionians and Aeolians could not appreciate the Achaemenid imperial ethos as the welcome antithesis to the more aggressive ideologies of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires,

because the Greeks had never chafed under the domination of these earlier monarchies. Nor could the Greeks, who lacked a tradition of divine-right kingship, fully understand the importance attached to the figure of the Achaemenid emperor, whose exaltation must have rang hollow with them. But viewed objectively the Persians were no more domineering toward the Greeks than the Lydians had been and, contrary to what some have stated, governed their Ionian and Aeolian subjects with the same light hand as they did other conquered peoples. Thus, before the Ionian Revolt of 499–494 BCE, the Persians did not garrison the Asiatic Greek cities that they subdued and, instead, followed the Lydian practice of prohibiting the Ionians and Aeolians from fortifying their settlements with walls that could prevent imperial forces from entering.¹³² Cyrus and his successors were also not wed to the idea of governing the Asiatic Greeks through tyrants; they only endorsed those tyrannies that had been in place before the Persian conquest.¹³³ Furthermore, once the Ionian Revolt made the Greeks' resentment of tyrannical rule manifest, the Achaemenids went so far as to institute democracies in the cities that had rebelled.¹³⁴ The sources further fail to support the charge of economic oppression that some scholars have made against the Persians, for the Ionians and Aeolians paid no more taxes to the Achaemenids than they had to the Lydians.¹³⁵

The Persians were generally respectful of Greek religious establishments. The fire-damaged ruins of Athena's sanctuary in Smyrna demonstrate that Mazares and Harpagus had ravaged certain Ionian temples during the campaigns of 544–540 BCE.¹³⁶

However, the same generals refrained from harming the great temple of Artemis in Ephesus, which city they also conquered by force. The high priest of that temple appears in later Greek literature with the Iranian title “Megabyxos” (Old Persian *Baga-Bukhsha*, “Servant of God”).¹³⁷ By bestowing this special title upon the Greek priest, the imperial government “aimed to tell the Persians in their own language that they had to respect the Divine”; Persian satraps thus had no right to help themselves to temple possessions or to violate the sanctuary’s right of asylum.¹³⁸ In addition to the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, Cyrus honored the sanctuaries of Apollo at Miletus, Claros, and Magnesia on the Maeander.¹³⁹ Darius highlighted Cyrus’ patronage of Apollo at this last location in his famous letter to the Persian Gadatas, whom Darius upbraided for besmirching the dignity of the god’s priests by forcing them to perform hard labor without royal permission.[§] Whether Cyrus’ respect for Apollo and Artemis stemmed from the syncretic identification of these two gods with the Iranian deities Mithra and Anahita remains unclear.¹⁴⁰ However, the Persians made no effort to stop the spread of Hellenism in Asia Minor and other provinces during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

Because Persian non-interference in local matters “found its limits in the subjects’ loyalties,” it was a privilege, not a right.¹⁴¹ So long as they paid their tribute and recognized the king’s overlordship, the subject nations were more or less free to do as they pleased. However, any overt acts of disobedience brought about the threat of heightened imperial control and, in the most extreme cases, military retaliation.¹⁴² The Persians were fully capable of

implementing the traditional methods of military pacification that previous Near Eastern monarchies had made famous. But we never hear of atrocities on the same scale or frequency as during the Assyrian period, or, for that matter, the Hellenistic one. Furthermore, we have no evidence of the Persians seeking to permanently eradicate entire settlements, as cities that were targeted for destruction were invariably rebuilt after suffering punishment. This practice perhaps derived from the Zoroastrian doctrine of universal salvation, which taught that the world would be rehabilitated at the end of time after it had been cleansed of the Lie.

In addition to a *laissez-faire* approach toward local government, Persian rule offered several distinct advantages to the empire's inhabitants. Military security was one of them. Not only did the Persians protect their subjects from hostile foreign tribes, but they also checked various predatory groups that dwelt within their empire.¹⁴³ They were not perfect in this last regard, for logistical limitations prevented them from permanently subduing recalcitrant tribes situated in remote, mountainous regions. However, Persian subjects were generally safe from brigandry.

The Persians also put an end to age-old feuds between neighboring tribes and city-states under their control. For example, Cyrus negotiated peace between the Armenians and Chaldaeans, and the later Achaemenids convened a federation of Phoenician city-states. Cyrus' successors similarly required the Asiatic Greeks to set aside their differences by entering into treaties with one another.¹⁴⁴

As one would expect, military security and political unity encouraged trade and commerce

throughout the territories subject to Persian control. Lydia, Cilicia, and Babylonia are known to have profited from the opening up of Iran and other frontiers to overland trade, while the Ionian cities remained the most important commercial hubs of the Greek world for many years after the Persian conquest.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the prime beneficiaries of the so-called *Pax Achaemenica*, or “Achaemenid Peace,” were the Phoenicians. Assyrian and Babylonian military aggression had depleted Phoenician manpower and wealth to the point that this maritime people could no longer contend on an equal footing with the Greeks for the trade in metals and other valuable commodities in the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁴⁶ However, the peaceful conditions of Persian rule, coupled with the political backing of the Achaemenid kings, enabled the Phoenicians to regain control over the same markets from which the Greeks had steadily excluded them beginning in the seventh century BCE.

Land improvement represented another interest of the Persians that benefited the masses. The Persians introduced *qanat* technology to different parts of the empire and, as a rule, allowed anyone who cultivated barren terrain to reap the benefits for five generations before title passed to the crown.¹⁴⁷ Cook recognized this policy as a “remarkable concession,” inasmuch as it provided an incentive for local communities to undertake massive irrigation projects on their own initiative.¹⁴⁸ Certain irrigation systems were, of course, constructed by special order of the crown, and the sources offer several examples of these, the most famous being the so-called “Royal Canal,” which Cyrus’ satrap, Gobryas, built in Babylonia along the course of the Median Wall between the Tigris and

Euphrates Rivers.¹⁴⁹ In Babylonia and presumably elsewhere, the Persians placed special officers in charge of irrigation systems, and their doing so makes sense given the critical importance of such systems to ancient economies.[¶]

In sum, the overlordship of the Persians was generally more efficient and benign than that of previous conquerors. Many subject nations must have even found life in the Persian Empire “relatively easy-going” and advantageous.¹⁵⁰ This was especially true among those peoples who had suffered from Assyrian or Babylonian militarism or the ravages of the steppe nomads. However, the Persians had perpetually to deal with the political dynamics intrinsic to imperial rule, and their overlordship was hardly flawless. Despite the sophisticated system of satrapal government, the king’s role remained paramount, and problems tended to abound whenever the monarchy was weak or negligent; power struggles often broke out whenever a monarch died, and some of these shook the empire to its foundations.¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, it is a testimony to the strength of the political ideology and administrative system that Cyrus established and Darius honed that, up until the time of the Macedonian conquest, the Persians could successfully and efficiently mobilize the vast human and material resources of their empire whenever circumstance required it.¹⁵² To conquer and destroy was one thing, to conquer and consolidate quite another.

** Consider the obstinacy of Vindafarna, discussed on pages 366–367.

† See pages 8, 77, 88, 140.

‡ It is perhaps significant that the Elamites also believed in a special force associated with kingship called the *Kitin*. According to Henkelman, this “hard-to-define abstraction” refers, in its broadest sense, “to divine authority and power as it emanates from the divine

world down to the mortal world. ‘Divine protection’ is a translation that covers some of its occurrences . . . Other uses of the term lead to supplementary interpretations such as ‘god-given royal power,’ ‘divinely enforced legal protection,’ ‘legal authority,’ ‘legal order, rules,’ and ‘divine symbol, emblem’”; Henkelman (2008a), 364. According to Garrison, the Elamite concept of the *Kitin* influenced Achaemenid art and, most likely, the Persians’ interpretation of the *Farnah*; see Garrison (2009), 36–37. So Cyrus’ claim that the gods had conferred to him an intangible, legitimizing force may have resonated with both Elamites and Persians.

§ Darius’ treatment of the rebel leaders Fravartish and Chissantakhma, both claimants to the Median royal mantle, may provide insights as to how Spitamas and Pactyes perished. Regarding each of the former two upstarts, Darius declares: “[the rebel] . . . was led to me. I cut off his nose and ears and tongue, and put out one eye; he was kept bound at my palace entrance, all the people saw him. Afterward I impaled him.” Darius’ treatment of these two rebels was exemplary due to his concerns about a possible revival of the Median Empire. As to other leaders of insurrections, Darius simply put them to death, without scourging them first.

¶ We do not know who served as Royal Spear-Bearer or Bow-Bearer to Cyrus. A tradition preserved by Aelian (*Historical Miscellany* 12.43) provides that Darius, the son of Hystaspes, “carried Cyrus’ bow” during the latter’s ill-fated campaign against the Massagetae in 530 BCE. See page 368.

** One frustrating tendency of the classical sources, which may reflect imprecision in the employment of bureaucratic terminology by the Persians themselves, is the use of the term “satrap” to designate both the chief officers of the satrapies, as well as the governors of lesser districts. Bruno Jacobs’ has reconstructed a tiered system of “major” and “minor satrapies” based on the *dahyava* lists in the royal inscriptions; see Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Achaemenid Satrapies.”

† Herodotus highlights the secretary’s autonomy from the satrap in his account of the treacherous Oroetes (3.128), whom Cyrus had appointed satrap of Lydia and whom Darius famously brought down in 520 BCE. According to Herodotus, Oroetes had used the disturbances following Cambyses’ death to establish his own autonomy and annex the satrapy of Hellespontine Phrygia. He then provided no assistance to Darius during the latter’s push for the throne. Darius wanted Oroetes dead, but because he could not yet risk a military confrontation with the powerful satrap, he settled upon a more subtle means of eliminating his foe. Specifically, he dispatched to Oroetes’ court a courier carrying a set of letters bearing the royal

seal. The courier handed the letters one by one to the chief secretary of the court, who read them aloud to Oroetes and his attendants, including Oroetes' one thousand Persian bodyguards. Although the first few letters dealt with mundane matters, both the courier and the secretary noticed that Oroetes' guards treated every mention of the Darius' name with the utmost respect. Thus encouraged, the courier gave the secretary a letter ordering all the Persians in Oroetes' service to lay down their spears – which the guards promptly did. Next came the final letter, which declared: “King Darius orders the Persians in Sardis to kill Oroetes!” Oroetes' guards promptly drew their swords and slew their master.

‡ See page Appendix III.

§ Darius' stern reprimand has survived, transcribed from the letter in which it was originally delivered onto a stone block found on the side of a farmer's house in Deirmendjik, Turkey: “King of Kings Darius, Hystaspes' son, thus says to Gadatas, subject: I learn that you do not obey my command in all things. That you cultivate my land by transplanting the fruits of [the province known as] Across the River, I commend your purpose, and because of this there shall be laid up for you great favor in the King's house. But because you ignore my policy in behalf of the gods, I will give you, if you do not change, proof of my wronged feelings, for you exacted tribute from the sacred cultivators of Apollo and commanded them to dig unhallowed ground, not knowing the mind of my ancestors toward the god who spoke the whole truth to the Persians.” For the translation, see Olmstead (1948), 156.

¶ See pages 175–176 for an example of irrigation control as a means of advancing imperial rule.

The Persian *Oecumene* in Reality and Art

Says Xerxes the King:

*By the Favor of Ahuramazda, I built this
Gateway of All Lands.*

—Inscription at the main entrance to Persepolis

The universal kingship that Cyrus and his successors claimed required that their empire be interconnected for purposes of transportation and communication. For the seafaring Greeks and Romans, the Mediterranean with its innumerable ports and harbors served as the centerpiece of the *Oecumene*, or “Inhabited World.” For the overland empire of the Persians, it was the famous Royal Road, which stretched from Ionian Ephesus to Susa and thence to Persia and beyond. The Ionian geographer Hecataeus was the first Westerner to describe this imperial highway, and because he was a contemporary of Darius I, the tendency among scholars is to attribute the establishment of the Royal Road to that king. However, Second Isaiah apparently heard about Persian road building in Cyrus’ day, for he declared that the Persian founder would “Make straight a high

road for your God in the Desert of Jordan.”¹ Furthermore, the fluid movement of armies back and forth between Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau documented in the Bisutun Inscription would have been impossible in the absence of well-maintained roads. The development and expansion of the Royal Road and the network of secondary arteries that branched off of it would thus seem to have commenced under Cyrus.

Like the old Assyrian and Hittite roads that they subsumed, Persian roads were paved with stone only in the immediate vicinities of large settlements. In this regard, they were inferior to the later roads of the Romans. Yet, the remarkable feature of the Persian highway system was the prevalence of way stations and caravanserais along heavily traveled routes. These rest stops featured “excellent inns,” according to Herodotus, and were typically situated at intervals of fifteen to twenty miles, or a single day’s journey on foot.² In addition to lodgings, numerous fortresses and gatehouses were located along the imperial highways, especially at key crossing points, such as mountain passes and rivers. Herodotus provides a detailed description of the western half of the Royal Road – that is, the segment between Ephesus and Susa – as it existed under Darius and his successors.³ This more or less reliable account, which probably goes back to Hecataeus, offers a reasonably complete itinerary for the different stages of the journey: Ephesus to Sardis, Sardis to the Halys River, the Halys to the Euphrates River in Armenia, the Euphrates to the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia, and the Tigris to Susa on the far side of the Zagros Mountains. The total distance, as reckoned from modern maps, is about one thousand

six hundred miles. The construction of rest stops and fortresses along this stretch doubtless took many years to complete, and it was probably Darius who oversaw the bulk of the work. But once it was finished, a casual wayfarer could travel from the Aegean Sea to Susa in approximately ninety days.

Information on the eastern half of the Royal Road is unfortunately sparse, so we may only speculate as to its course and the condition of its upkeep. Ctesias compiled a complete itinerary of the empire's arteries that would have shed valuable light on these matters, but this work is unfortunately now lost. According to other sources, the Royal Road proceeded from Susa through the Persian Gates to the Marv Dasht and thence through Carmania, where it split into two branches, one of which continued due east to India via Makran and the other northward to Bactria and Sogdiana. Herodotus is careful to note that the threat of brigandry was negligible along the western half of the Royal Road, because the route passed through only "inhabited country." It is doubtful that this condition held true in the east, where the mountains of Afghanistan and the wastes of Baluchistan have always been home to marauding tribes. Accordingly, the onus fell upon the satraps of the east, more so than upon their counterparts in the west, to patrol the Royal Road and clear it of bandits.

Numerous crossroads, some perhaps maintained with the same level of care as the Royal Road, linked the great central artery to key cities that did not lie along its course. The sources mention one crossroad in Asia Minor that intersected the Royal Road in Cappadocia and connected the Cilician capital of Tarsus on the Mediterranean Sea to Sinope on the

Black Sea. An extension of this crossroad traversed Syria and the cities of the Levant as far as Gaza. Further inland, Babylon was accessible from the Royal Road at three locations: Melitene on the Euphrates, Arbela in the Assyrian heartland, and Susa in the Elamite lowlands. The Great Khorasan Road continued to be used and intersected the Royal Road at Arbela in the west and Bactra in the east. Ecbatana dominated the intersection between the Great Khorasan Road and the north-south trade route that linked the Caspian littoral to the Persian Gulf.

The ancient Greeks marveled at the speed with which the royal couriers could carry news along the empire's highways. Like the Pony Express of the nineteenth century, the Persian courier service used fresh relays of horsemen to traverse a given distance in the least amount of time. Herodotus offers the following description:

Riders are stationed along the road, equal in number to the number of days the journey takes – a man and a horse for each day. Nothing stops these couriers from covering their allotted stage in the quickest possible time – neither snow, rain, heat, nor darkness. The first, at the end of his stage, passes the dispatch to the second, the second to the third, and so on along the line, as in the Greek torch-race which is held in honor of Hephaestus. The Persian word for this sort of post is *angareion*.⁴

Herodotus describes this system of communication as “a Persian invention,” when, in fact, Tiglathpileser III had used relays of horsemen to carry messages throughout the Assyrian Empire.⁵ However, the Assyrian relay system was neither as expansive nor, perhaps, as efficient as the Persian one. In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon attributes the establishment of the Persian courier service to Cyrus

and describes its workings in greater detail:

[Cyrus] experimented to find out how great a distance a horse could cover in a day when ridden hard but not so as to break down, and then he erected post-stations at just such distances and equipped them with horses and men to take care of them; at each one of the stations he had the proper official appointed to receive the letters that were delivered and to forward them on, to take in the exhausted horses and riders and send on fresh ones. They say, moreover, that sometimes this express does not stop all night, but the night-messengers succeed the day-messengers in relays, and when that is the case, this express, some say, gets over the ground faster than the cranes. If their story is not literally true, it is at all events undeniable that this is the fastest overland travelling on earth; and it is a fine thing to have immediate intelligence of everything, in order to attend to it as quickly as possible.⁶

The Persepolis Fortification Tablets have preserved the name of the express courier service in Elamite form as *pirradazish*, which appears to be related to New Persian *pishtaz*, or “forerunner.”⁷ We may trust the term found in the Tablets over that given by Herodotus (*angareion*), which based on etymology and context would seem to have applied only to messages delivered by town criers.⁸ It has been estimated that the Persian *pirradazish* could cover the distance from Susa to Sardis in less than two weeks.⁹

Of course, the use of horse-borne messengers represented just one form of communication used by the Persians. In the more mountainous parts of the empire, lookout posts were established at regular intervals within earshot of one another and manned by “those of the inhabitants with the loudest voices.”¹⁰ The Persians further perfected and passed on to other ancient peoples the art of communicating by fire signals. According to the *De Mundo*, the Persian kings maintained special beacons for this purpose just

outside their capitals, and Herodotus notes their use during military campaigns.¹¹

Aside from providing reliable lines of communication, the Royal Road and other imperial arteries served as military routes. John Manuel Cook has noted that expanding empires need good roads to facilitate troop movements, whereas contracting ones need poor roads to impede the progress of invading armies.¹² The relative ease with which Alexander the Great marched through the Persian Empire in the second half of the fourth century BCE bears testimony to the fine work that Cyrus and his successors did in maintaining the empire's roads.

Cyrus' desire to generate wealth must have motivated his road-building initiative at least in part, as it was along the great imperial highways that money and luxury goods began to pour into Persia. It has been noted that Persian rule heralded an unprecedented surge in international commerce, for the establishment of a single governmental authority over so vast an expanse made long-distance travel considerably safer and easier than before.¹³ It is therefore no surprise that foreign markets appeared in almost every major city of the empire in the wake of Cyrus' conquests, such that Lydian bazaars could be found throughout Mesopotamia and Babylonian bankers could do business in distant Ecbatana. Some level of provinciality must have persisted, however, for Greek understanding about the countries to the east of the Zagros remained poor before the time of Alexander. Nevertheless, Greek merchants are known to have traded in Armenia, Mesopotamia, and the Levant during the Persian period. Furthermore, the fine work of Ionian craftsmen at Pasargadae and the

discovery of a Persepolis Fortification Tablet inscribed in Greek attest to the presence of Greeks in the Persian heartland during the empire's early years.

One consequence of the commercial revolution that followed on the heels of Cyrus' conquests was the development of worldly tastes in luxury goods among the wealthy. Thus, social elites throughout the Persian Empire came to favor Arabian spices, Anatolian leather, and Bactrian lapis lazuli. The most valuable precious metal in the ancient world was gold, which, according to Strabo, the Persians cherished exceedingly because of its "fiery appearance."¹⁴ The major sources of gold within Cyrus' empire were Lydia and Bactria, but large supplies were also imported from India and Siberia.¹⁵ Siberia was pulled into the Persian Empire's vast trading network due to the close commercial ties that the inhabitants of Transoxiana had with the nomadic tribes living beyond the Jaxartes. The existence of a vibrant trade between the steppe nomads and the Persian Empire is demonstrated by the numerous Persian and Persian-influenced artifacts that have turned up in remote corners of the Eurasian steppe. Archaeologists have found Achaemenid jewelry and vases in a Sarmatian tomb by the Ural River, while the tomb of one nomadic chieftain in the Altai Mountains has yielded a rug depicting rows of Persian or Median cavalry marching in procession.¹⁶ Direct trade between China and Iran is unattested before the Parthian period, when the Han emperor Wu Ti sent emissaries to Iran in search of "heavenly" warhorses to replenish the Chinese breeds that had been decimated during the wars leading up to the formation of his kingdom (approximately 140 BCE).¹⁷ However, Iranian

influence has been identified in Chinese wax castings of the sixth century BCE, so it is probable that already during the Achaemenid period small quantities of Near Eastern goods entered China from eastern Iran and vice versa due to the dealings of the steppe nomads. In any event, the interconnection of the great caravan routes of Central Asia with the highways of the Persian Empire helped pave the path for the later Silk Road.¹⁸

An interesting question is whether Cyrus attempted to facilitate maritime trade within the coastal regions of his empire. Historically, the Persians were not a seafaring people, and Herodotus does not refer to them as mobilizing the naval resources of their subjects before the reign of Cambyses II, who raised a Phoenician fleet for his expedition against Egypt. Consequently, it has often been assumed that, unlike Darius and Xerxes, Cyrus had no interest in sailing the seas or in enriching his empire even further by fostering overseas commerce.¹⁹ Yet, this view can no longer be accepted.

Not only is there evidence to suggest that Gobryas, Cyrus' satrap of Babylonia and Abarnahara, actively constructed waterways and harbors, but also in 1971, archaeologists discovered the remains of an Achaemenid palace at Borazjan about twelve miles inland from the modern port of Bushehr.²⁰ Experts initially believed that the Borazjan palace belonged to Darius, but structural similarities between it and the palaces at Pasargadae point to Cyrus as the founder. Alexander's admiral Nearchus noted the presence of the Borazjan palace during his voyage through the Persian Gulf and associated it with the port city of Taoce, to which it was linked by a canal.²¹ Taoce

appears in Islamic sources as *Tawwaj* and in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets as *Tamukkan*.²² Babylonian documents from the last decade of Cyrus' reign mention the transport of laborers, cattle, and building materials to this site in connection with a royal construction project.²³ It is noteworthy that the area around Taoce had long served as an important maritime center for trade across the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. An Elamite settlement named Liyan had existed there before the Persians arrived, and Daniel Potts has found evidence of maritime contacts between this city and Oman during the second millennium BCE.²⁴ Despite its lengthy history, the Persian Gulf trade had diminished greatly by the time Cyrus came to power due to primitive shipbuilding techniques, a scarcity of ports, and a surprising loss of knowledge about adjacent waterways (the Mesopotamians and Elamites of Cyrus' day apparently no longer knew the way by sea to the Indus River, to which their ancestors had regularly sailed in past centuries). Cyrus' construction of a royal palace at Taoce doubtless formed part of a broader initiative aimed at revitalizing strategically located maritime centers along the northern coast of the Gulf.²⁵ As part of the same initiative, Cyrus sketched out a plan for populating certain coastal towns and islands with colonies of seafaring peoples. He himself planted a community of Carians near the Tigris in southern Iraq, while his successors established settlements of Ionians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians at other locations.²⁶

Like many of Cyrus' important economic endeavors, the full revival of the Persian Gulf trade did not occur until the reign of Darius. Darius made it a top priority to develop commerce in the so-called

“Sea that goes from Persia,” the term used in inscriptions to describe the Persian Gulf and adjoining bodies of water, as far as the Red Sea.** To this end, he ordered the famous Carian admiral Scylax of Caryanda, perhaps a resident of the colony that Cyrus had founded in southern Mesopotamia and the historical personage behind the legendary figure of Sinbad the Sailor, to ascertain, once and for all, the maritime routes between Persia, India, and Egypt.²⁷ Scylax sailed down the Indus River to the Indian Ocean, and thence to the Straits of Hormuz and around the Arabian Peninsula, before docking in the Gulf of Aqaba at the northern tip of the Red Sea, all in the span of thirty months.²⁸ In the aftermath of Scylax’s exploratory voyage, Darius ordered the excavation of a canal between the Red Sea and the Nile River in Egypt, thus establishing for the first time direct maritime contacts between Iran and the Mediterranean World. The opening of the Egyptian canal (a forerunner of the modern Suez) represented one of the crowning achievements of Darius’ reign, and the proud king set up several multilingual inscriptions commemorating the event, one of which recounts how he first hatched the plan to dig the canal while staying in the palace that Cyrus had built in Persia.²⁹

Iranian Diaspora and Cultural Syncretism

The Achaemenid period was one of unprecedented cultural ferment. The establishment of an empire that encompassed so many different nations had the predictable consequence of bringing diverse cultures

into direct contact with one another. Babylonian texts attest to the establishment in Mesopotamia of colonies of Persians, Carians, Lydians, Phrygians, Sakas, Elamites, and other peoples in the immediate aftermath of Cyrus' conquest.³⁰ A similar degree of cultural diversity existed in Asia Minor, where the sources mention colonies of Persians, Medes, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and Assyrians among others.³¹ Both the Persepolis Fortification Tablets and the classical authors document the existence within Iran of settlements occupied by peoples from Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere.

These colonies were founded under different circumstances, some inauspicious. Cyrus and his successors practiced population deportation, albeit never on the same scale as the Assyrians or Babylonians and generally only in response to the most dangerous uprisings. Some colonies were, therefore, populated by exiles or prisoners of war who had been forcibly displaced from their homes. The Persian kings also granted estates to their soldiers as pensions.³² Other colonies consisted of artisans, merchants, or laborers who served the estates of nobles involved in the satrapal administration.³³ In Babylonia and elsewhere, foreign colonies were generally located on "crown lands" – that is, lands owned directly by the Persian royal family. These usually consisted of long abandoned territories that the Persians planned to return to economic productivity or, in the more common scenario, real property confiscated from native princes or aristocrats whose authority the Persians wished to curb.³⁴ Although the colonists generally enjoyed upward social mobility in their new countries, they did not

always acclimate seamlessly; references to ethnic tensions in the Old Testament and other sources attest to the fact.

The critical element in intercultural exchange during the Achaemenid period was the establishment of a strong Persian presence in the provinces. Cyrus initiated what recent scholars have termed the “Iranian diaspora” by settling Persians and Medes in estates near the empire’s major cities.³⁵ His motivation in so doing was manifold. Besides the reasons mentioned above, the Persian conqueror deemed it necessary to create throughout the empire a strong network of Persian and Median landowners and retainers loyal to the crown. Persian settlers in the provinces comprised the elites of the satrapal armies and, when necessary, could form militias capable of quelling local insurrections. Cyrus may also have encouraged certain Persians to relocate to the provinces to end competition over pastures and farmlands back home. The Persian heartland was underdeveloped compared to Mesopotamia and western Asia Minor, and Herodotus reports that certain Persian nobles once lobbied Cyrus to authorize a mass migration of the Persian people to some more bountiful province.³⁶ Cyrus rejected their proposal with his famous statement that “soft lands breed soft men.” Herodotus used Cyrus’ response to close out *The Histories*, because he shared the conqueror’s views on the dangers of excessive luxury and the fundamental difference between ascending and declining empires. Yet, stripped of its moralistic undertones, the story of the Persians’ proposal and Cyrus’ response suggests that resources in Persia were strained, and although Cyrus dedicated himself to developing his paternal

homeland, he may have conceded that the most expedient solution was to entice some Persians to relocate to other provinces.

For Iranians abroad, the satrapal capitals served as the main links to life back home.³⁷ As Herodotus indicates, Cyrus worried that Persians living away from Iran might lose their grit. To this end, he required all Persians who received land grants in foreign provinces to frequent the satrapal courts and send their sons to the satrap's "gate" to receive proper Persian educations.³⁸ The satrapal capitals thus functioned analogously to the Greek colonies of the Hellenistic era, insofar as the latter served as centers of Greek culture and learning throughout the empires of Alexander and the Diadochi. Nevertheless, whereas Greek colonists actively Hellenized local elites, Persian settlers made no effort to impress their culture upon non-Persians.³⁹ Persian abstinence in this regard finds reflection in the sources, which show the Achaemenid kings as reveling in the cultural diversity of their empire. We might speculate that such unwillingness to forcefully assimilate foreign peoples to the Persian way of life owed to an express directive from Cyrus.

Be this as it may, cultural assimilation did occur, and on no small scale. Members of the Persian high nobility may have prided themselves on keeping their Aryan bloodlines pure.⁴⁰ But many Persians of the diaspora, most of them common soldiers before receiving land grants from the king, took native wives and allowed their daughters to marry native men. Babylonian documents from the Achaemenid period demonstrate this point. Many such texts refer to Iranians living in Mesopotamia who gave their children Babylonian names, as well as to Babylonians

whose children carried Iranian names.⁴¹ A similar picture emerges in Asia Minor, where the onomastic evidence indicates that Iranian settlers intermarried with native aristocratic families.⁴² As one might expect, the offspring of such marriages adopted the social habits of both Iranians and natives.

In the western provinces, a convergence of Iranian and native cultures is attested even in the absence of firm evidence of intermarriage. Thus, within a few generations of the Persian conquest, it became the vogue for Phoenician vassal princes to wear Iranian riding outfits and for Persian grandees in Asia Minor to attend drinking banquets bedecked in Greek or Lydian robes.⁴³ It bears emphasis that, as far as we can tell, the acculturation of Persians and natives in the provinces was organic; the phenomenon presumably reflected the Persians' desire to adapt to their new surroundings, as well as to the natives' efforts to gain status by imitating the empire's ruling race.⁴⁴

Cross-cultural marriages had a profound impact on religious developments throughout the Persian Empire. For example, one Babylonian text mentions an Iranian named Mithradata ("Created by Mithra"), whose Babylonian wife, Esagil-belit ("Lady of Esagila"), bore a son named Bagavira (the "Godly One" in Old Persian). In their review of these names, Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin have concluded that "inasmuch as all the names that have been cited . . . are theophoric . . . we may suppose that the bearers of these names worshipped both their own traditional gods, and foreign ones."⁴⁵

The Persian period witnessed intense religious syncretism, a trend that continued into Hellenistic and Roman times. Already under Cyrus the inhabitants of

Asia Minor seem to have identified the Greek gods Apollo and Artemis with the Iranian deities Mithra and Anahita.⁴⁶ The latter two divinities continued their earlier associations with the Babylonian gods Shamash and Ishtar in Mesopotamia and western Iran.⁴⁷ At the same time, Ahuramazda became known to the Greeks as the Persian Zeus and was conflated with Marduk and Anu in Babylonia.⁴⁸ The Jews never acknowledged Ahuramazda as Yahweh's equivalent. However, knowledge of Ahuramazda almost certainly influenced the Jewish perception of Yahweh, as we have seen. Furthermore, just as Zoroastrian influence contributed to the transformation of Judaism into an abstract, universal religion, so, too, were other religions within the Persian Empire affected by exposure to foreign faiths.

According to Martin West, the early years of Persian rule proved formative in the development of classical Greek philosophy and religion.⁴⁹ Before the Persian period, the Greeks had little interest in cosmology and ascribed human qualities to their gods, who slept, ate, emoted, and feuded like ordinary men and women. Moreover, Greek notions of human eschatology generally failed to account for morality, inasmuch as little distinction was drawn between the fates of good and evil souls.⁵⁰ This all began to change with the coming of Cyrus. In the writings of Pherecydas of Syros, a Greek philosopher of the mid-sixth century BCE whom later generations remembered as having visited Cyrus' court, we find for the first time in Greek literature the notion that all matter originated from Time and that the human soul is "immortal" – in other words, that it is reincarnated after death depending on whether the individual was

pious or wicked in his past life.⁵¹ At about the same time, Anaximander of Miletus developed a complex cosmology in which the world derived from a “boundless” substance that is in constant motion and that the sun, moon, and stars orbit the earth in vast rings, as ordained by Time. A generation later, another Milesian philosopher named Anaximenes explained solar and lunar eclipses in terms of the movements of dark planets. The arrival of the Persians in Asia Minor also coincided with a sudden change in the Greek perception of the divine. Philosophers such as Xenophanes of Colophon ceased to attribute anthropomorphic qualities to the gods and, instead, argued that they were formless, aloof entities.⁵² West has convincingly identified strains of Phoenician, Babylonian, Indian, and Iranian influence in these new Greek ideas. In particular, he has attributed a major role in their formation to the Magi, who likely engaged in discourse with Ionian sages and passed on to them knowledge gleaned from other eastern wise men. Although the new ideas were generally theological rather than rational in nature, West has argued that they expanded the horizons of Greek thought so as to make possible the critical shift toward empiricism that represented one of the landmark achievements of Greek philosophy during the fifth century BCE:

But what invaded Greek speculation in the mid sixth century was no mere convolvulus that withered away when its season was past, leaving the sturdy stems of Hellenic rationalism to grow unimpeded as they had always meant to. It was an ambrosia plant that produced a permanent enlargement where it touched. In some ways one might say that it was the very extravagance of oriental fancy that freed the Greeks from the limitations of what they could see with their own eyes:

led them to think of ten-thousand-year cycles instead of human generations, of an infinity beyond the visible sky and below the foundations of the earth, of a life not bounded by womb and tomb but renewed in different bodies aeon after aeon. It was now that they learned to think that good men and bad have different destinations after death; that the fortunate soul ascends to the luminaries of heaven; that God is intelligence; that the cosmos is one living creature; that the material world can be analyzed in terms of a few basic constituents such as fire, water, earth, metal; that there is a world of Being beyond perception, beyond time. These were conceptions of enduring importance for ancient philosophy. This was the gift of the Magi.⁵³

The cultural exchange between East and West went both ways, of course. Hellenism continued to gain ground in Asia Minor and the Levant, and Cyrus and his successors appreciated the artistic and technical expertise of the Greeks and incorporated elements of Greek sculpture, which tended toward realism, into the official art of the empire.⁵⁴ In contrast to later epochs, however, the intellectual influence of the Greeks upon the Persians during the Achaemenid period was negligible compared to that exerted by the Mesopotamians. The Achaemenid period witnessed the adoption by the Iranians of numerous Babylonian and Assyrian concepts related to kingship, political organization, and, most importantly, theology, a field that was intimately intertwined with what the Mesopotamians considered to be science.⁵⁵

The fluid movement of peoples and ideas within the Persian Empire had both positive and negative consequences for the development of Zoroastrianism. The Iranian diaspora led to the widespread geographical dispersion of the Zoroastrian community. Several centuries before Cyrus, Zoroastrianism had

been an exclusively eastern Iranian religion. However, during the Achaemenid period, Zoroastrians settled in all the empire's provinces and established the cult of Ahuramazda in each satrapal capital. It is significant that, despite the tremendous influence that Zoroastrianism had on other religions, Zoroastrian settlers made no discernible efforts to convert non-Iranians to their religion.⁵⁶ Adrian David Bivar has argued that, to solidify Zoroastrianism's status as the chief religion within Iran, Cyrus induced many die-hard Mithraists who were opposed to Zoroastrianism to relocate to the peripheries of his empire.⁵⁷ Bivar's theory may explain why the later Mithraic cults of Asia Minor and Bactria shared certain similarities that are unattested within the core territories of Iran.⁵⁸

In addition to venerating their own deities, many Iranians of the diaspora adopted the worship of foreign gods. A fifth or fourth century BCE Greek inscription from Sardis records a satrapal edict dedicating a statue to "Zeus Baradates" ("Ahuramazda the Lawgiver") while prohibiting Persian officials from participating in the mysteries of two Anatolian deities.⁵⁹ As the edict demonstrates, the central government concerned itself to prevent a deterioration of Zoroastrian values among the Persians in the provinces.

The presence of Persian settlers is poorly attested within the Iranian lands. However, Persians undoubtedly received land grants in the Iranian satrapies, and the persistence of strong Iranian ties presumably led to Persian settlers intermarrying more readily with natives in these parts of the empire than elsewhere. Richard Frye has speculated that a mixture of western Iranian peoples occurred during the

Achaemenid period and that this development contributed to the breakdown of national distinctions between Medes and Persians.⁶⁰ The latter point is not immediately apparent in the sources, for even the last Achaemenid kings differentiated between their Median and Persian subjects. But the sudden, widespread geographical dispersion of Persians and Medes, coupled with the establishment of a strong central government that demanded the allegiance of the empire's two leading nations, diminished the significance previously attached to tribal affiliations. Loyalty to the state gradually replaced loyalty to the tribe, and tribal designations seem to have become obsolete among the Medes and Persians within a few generations after Cyrus' conquests.

In sum, the Persian Empire surpassed all previous Near Eastern kingdoms in its cosmopolitan makeup. Furthermore, although Cyrus and his successors placed great stock in the cultural and ethnic diversity of their empire, a significant degree of acculturation occurred, especially in the provinces. In this regard, the Persian Empire was the true forerunner of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires, the rulers of which, like the Achaemenid kings, aspired to sovereignty over the Inhabited World.

Seats of Power: Ecbatana, Babylon, Susa, Pasargadae

For Cyrus, western Iran and Mesopotamia represented the geographical core of the Persian *Oecumene*, and it was within these territories that he established his main residences. Like his royal

successors, Cyrus never remained in the same city throughout the year. This made for good policy. So much of the Persian king's prestige depended upon the pomp and grandeur that surrounded his person at all times that he benefited from traveling throughout his domain and impressing as many of his subjects as possible with his majesty. Consequently, the Persian Empire never possessed a single capital like the Roman Empire; rather, the true locus of power was wherever the king happened to be, and for a significant portion of the year, that meant the road.

Whenever the Persian king traveled or ventured on campaign, his tent operated as a mobile palace. A similar custom had existed among Median royalty; thus, Nicholas of Damascus states that the capture of Astyages' tent provided the long-awaited occasion for Cyrus to declare himself "King of the Medes."⁶¹ Several sources describe the Persian king's tent. Woven with purple and gold cloth, it was supported by numerous silver poles and had a pointed roof.⁶² According to the classical authors, a large crystal plaque carved with the image of the sun crowned the tip of the royal tent, which was always pitched facing the east.⁶³ The tent was divided into different compartments, including servants' quarters. One compartment served as the king's bedchamber, another as his dining hall, and yet another as his throne room.⁶⁴ All throughout the tent were silver torches, sumptuous divans, ivory furniture, and other costly adornments.⁶⁵ So magnificent was the royal tent that, according to Plutarch, the Athenian Odeon, a spectacular construction that rivaled the Parthenon in grandeur, was modeled after it.⁶⁶

Cyrus must have ruled from his tent for much of

the second decade of his reign, when he was constantly on the march. Even then, several cities served as important imperial centers. Ecbatana was one of them. Cyrus had used this city as a royal residence since his victory over Astyages. The Book of Ezra provides that Ecbatana housed an important document archive, and several scholars have suggested that Ecbatana was the main administrative center of Cyrus' empire.⁶⁷ Such an interpretation of the historical data accords with Cyrus' policy of continuity with respect to Median political institutions. On the other hand, Ecbatana certainly lost some of its former prestige following the Persian conquest, when Cyrus transported the contents of its treasury to Anshan. Then, as now, Ecbatana was particularly delightful in the summer. While much of the rest of the Iranian plateau scorches hot under the summer sun, Media enjoys a temperate climate due to its lofty elevation and northerly location. Ecbatana thus served as the regular summer capital of Cyrus and his successors, many of whom constructed palaces and left inscriptions there.⁶⁸

During the cold winter months, snowfall blocked the Zagros passes leading to and from the Iranian plateau. So Cyrus and his court usually wintered in Susa or Babylon, whence they could more easily monitor the empire's western provinces. Cyrus seems to have used Nabuchadnezzar's palace whenever he visited Babylon, and Xenophon states that he often stayed there for up to seven months of the year.⁶⁹ The earliest Achaemenid construction at Susa dates to the reign of Darius, under whom that city became the main administrative capital of the Persian Empire. But according to Strabo, Cyrus had already planned to

make Susa the empire's principal seat of power:

For the Persians and Cyrus, after mastering the Medes, saw that their native land was situated rather on the extremities of their empire, and that Susa was farther in and nearer to Babylonia and the other tribes, and therefore established the royal seat of their empire at Susa.⁷⁰

Be this as it may, no structures attributed to Cyrus have been found at Susa, and while we may reasonably suppose that the great conqueror carried out some work in the former Elamite capital, it is abundantly clear that his efforts were focused elsewhere.⁷¹ Persian pride demanded the construction of a royal center in the imperial heartland, and so Cyrus dedicated himself to building the palace complex at Pasargadae, the site of his great victory over the Medes.

Pasargadae lies approximately fifty-five miles northeast of Shiraz, along the ancient north-south caravan road that once ran from Ecbatana to the Persian Gulf. It is located in the Dasht-e Morghab, at an elevation of approximately 6,200 feet above sea level. Almost entirely ringed by mountains, the Dasht-e Morghab is now largely treeless and prone to dust devils, but this was not always the case; archaeologists have found traces of oak shrub along the peripheries of the plain, and the classical authors speak of the area surrounding Cyrus' monuments as having been densely vegetated.⁷² The plain's most prominent natural feature is the Pulvar River (the ancient Medus), a strong current that traverses the plain from the mountains to the north.⁷³ A lesser stream, the Morghab River, also cuts across the plain. It may well have been on account of these streams that the Pasargadae tribe claimed the plain, which had been

subject to sparse Elamite settlement since the fourth millennium BCE, as its sacred grounds.⁷⁴

Scholars once believed that Cyrus had already commenced work on the palaces at Pasargadae before rebelling against Astyages. The main archaeological support for this view was claimed to rest in the several trilingual inscriptions set in doorways and various palace antae that read: “I am Cyrus, the King, the Achaemenid.” The use in this text of the simple title “King,” as opposed to the more elaborate “Great King” or “King of Kings,” was believed to indicate Cyrus’ servitude to Astyages and, perhaps, secondary status within Persia to Darius’ grandfather, Arsames. However, the Achaemenids did not always include their full titulary in brief, caption-like inscriptions, and we now know that all the important structures at Pasargadae exhibit evidence of Lydian or Ionian masonry; although Cyrus may have imported foreign artisans to work on his palace complex while still a Median vassal, the simpler explanation is that construction began only after the Persian conquest of Asia Minor in 545 BCE.⁷⁵

The ruins of Pasargadae are poorly preserved compared to those at Persepolis. Ironically, this is because Pasargadae, unlike Persepolis, was never systematically destroyed.⁷⁶ Thus, whereas much of what remains at Persepolis was, until the early twentieth century, buried under a thick layer of ash and dirt that protected the ruins from robbers, vagrants, and the elements, the key structures at Pasargadae have remained exposed for over two thousand five hundred years. All that is left are the remnants of three palatial structures, two colonnaded pavilions, a small bridge, a stone tower known locally

as the Zendan-e Soleiman (“Prison of Solomon”), two stone plinths, an imposing stone edifice called Takht-e Madar-e Soleiman (the “Throne of Solomon’s Mother”), and Cyrus’ tomb.[†]

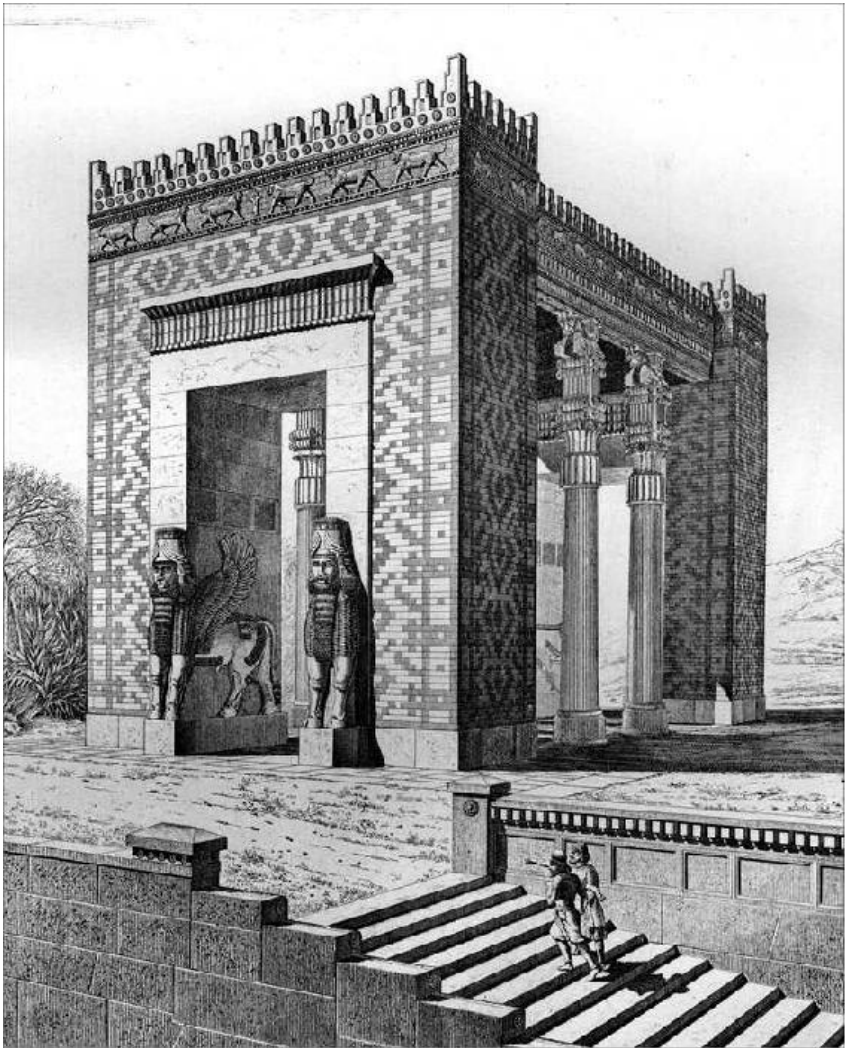
Archaeologists have termed the three palatial structures Gate R, Palace S, and Palace P. Because these buildings lie some distance apart, scholars have surmised that Cyrus intended for Pasargadae’s site plan to resemble that of a nomadic encampment.⁷⁷ This may well be, for the fourth century BCE Greek historian Anaximenes of Lampsacus explains the name *Passargadai* to mean the “Camp of the Persians.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, the Greek authors typically speak of Pasargadae as a true urban settlement, and recent subsurface investigations have identified traces of additional structures in the Dasht-e Morghab.⁷⁹

The key structures at Pasargadae were all located within a man-made park, and the centerpiece of the main palace complex was a large, artificially irrigated garden. As dwellers of an arid land, the Persians loved ornamental gardens, which they called “paradises” (Old Persian **paridaida*, cognate of Avestan *paradaeza*), and flouted their gardening skills as much as their military prowess.⁸⁰ According to Xenophon, Cyrus, “the most famous prince . . . who ever wore a crown,” once declared that it would be no injustice for him to receive the gifts customarily bequeathed to both warriors and farmers, for he had “carried off the palm in stocking [his] country and also in protecting the goods with which it had been stocked.”⁸¹ Cyrus’ garden at Pasargadae must have been particularly breathtaking and stocked with exotic plants from all over his empire.[‡] After all, just as the Persians made their empire more cosmopolitan by relocating

different ethnic groups, so too did they strive to enhance the economic productivity and aesthetic beauty of each province by introducing to it the bounties of the rest.⁸² The intricate system of stone waterways that archaeologists have discovered at Pasargadae illustrates the great level of attention that Cyrus paid to the layout of his garden.⁸³ Divided into four quadrants, the garden was accessible from Gate R via a stone bridge that crossed a small canal or ancient stream. Colonnaded pavilions marked each of the two approaches to the garden, which also contained an ornamental pool.

Gate R served as the main entrance to the palace complex. A freestanding rectangular structure with a columned hall, the Gate was originally the loftiest building at Pasargadae and measured over fifty feet tall. It was entered through front and side doors, and its main entrance was guarded by two colossal winged bulls, each carved from a single block of limestone.⁸⁴ The bovine figures that flanked the exit to the park were identical in size and form, except that they had human heads, like the earlier Assyrian *aladlammus*.⁸⁵ All this is known from the few fragments of broken statuary that archaeologists have discovered in the vicinity of the Gate; but even this testimony, as scant and disappointing as it is, speaks volumes about the image that Cyrus wanted to project at Pasargadae.⁸⁶ Winged bulls and winged bulls with human heads were favorite subjects of Assyrian royal art. The Assyrians applied these fantastic creatures as protective spirits to ward off invisible demons and other malevolent forces believed to lurk in the air. So ubiquitously were these guardian spirits represented throughout Assyria's imperial capitals that the images

became synonymous with royal power. Thus, by decorating his own palace complex with images of winged bulls and *aladlammus*, Cyrus was invoking enduring symbols of imperial might and majesty recognizable to all the inhabitants of the Near East.



Nineteenth-century reconstruction of the Gateway of All Lands at Persepolis. The depiction of this gatehouse as freestanding is now known to be inaccurate. Cyrus, however, had a freestanding gatehouse at Pasargadae that may have looked somewhat similar to this.

The same motivation explains the outfit and bizarre headdress of the famous winged genius, once one of four similar figures to grace the interior of Gate R. In broad brush, the figure resembles the guardian spirit commonly encountered in Assyrian art alongside the *asherah*, or “tree of life.”⁸⁷ But the Pasargadae figure “is not by any means a straightforward copy.”⁸⁸ The figure’s large wings are Syrian or Assyrian, but its robe is Elamite and headdress Egyptian or Levantine. Scholars have seen in this “sinister” figure “an expression of the oecumenical attitude of the Achaemenian kings, who, from the time of Cyrus onward, adopted a liberal policy of tolerance and conciliation toward the various religions embraced within their empire.”⁸⁹ However, one can hardly doubt that the figure also served to remind visitors of the empire’s enormous territorial extent and, regarding its Egyptian headdress, possibly an eye toward future conquests. Richard Barnett has noted that the figure’s costume contains elements derived from cultures located in the southwestern quadrant of the empire.⁹⁰ His theory is that each of the four figures that once graced the interior of Gate R differed in appearance so as to evoke the cultures belonging to a specific imperial quadrant; taken together, the four figures symbolized Persian rule over the “Four Corners of the Universe.”⁹¹



Charles Texier's nineteenth-century drawing of the four-winged guardian from Gate R at Pasargadae. The inscription atop the figure, which reads, "I am Cyrus, the king, an Achaemenid," is no longer present and the relief itself is badly weathered.

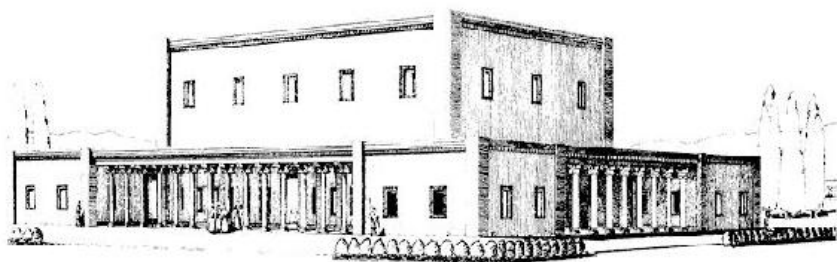
Palace S was Cyrus' main audience hall. Inspired by the rectangular temples of the Ionian Greeks, the building originally consisted of an enclosed central chamber flanked on all four sides by porticoes, the largest of which contained two rows of twenty-four columns facing the garden to the northeast. The building's dimensions were impressive – its inner hall measured approximately 105 feet by 72 feet, and its front porch was over 187 feet long – but modest compared to the later structures at Persepolis and Susa. As at those sites, the stone columns at Pasargadae terminated in capitals, or more accurately, impost blocks, shaped in the foreparts of two beasts merged together at the back.⁹² These beasts were usually bulls or lions, and less frequently horses, griffins, *aladlammus*, or other mythical creatures. The long beams of cedar and timber that these capitals once supported were carved with rosettes and other ornate designs, and either colored or plated with gold. The limestone columns of the inner chamber were surprisingly slender, each measuring 40 feet tall and about 3.5 feet in circumference. Because their height nearly doubled that of the pillars in the porticoes, light must have entered the central chamber through high-set windows situated along raised walls.



Achaemenid column capitals from Persepolis in the shape of a human-headed bull, or *aladlammu* (left), and an actual bull (right). The columns of Cyrus' palace at

The few truncated reliefs that still remain at Palace S indicate a heavy Mesopotamian influence. The scene on one doorway once depicted an aquatic genius shrouded in a cloak of fish scales followed by a bull-man; the scene on the other doorway showed a kilted warrior known as the “smiting god” together with a lionish monster with eagle’s feet. In Mesopotamian art, the cloak of fish scales symbolized Ea, god of water and intelligence, while the bull-man, or *shedû*, opened the gates of dawn for the sun god Shamash. The eagle-footed monster appears in both Assyrian and Urartian art and is portrayed alongside the smiting god in an intact relief discovered in the ruins of Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh.⁹³ Cyrus may have seen this relief during one of his campaigns and ordered his artists to make sketches or casts from which the images could be reproduced at Pasargadae.⁹⁴ Cyrus’ desire to copy the Nineveh relief speaks volumes about the objective of his artistic program, for the same lion-headed monster that the Assyrians believed protected them from frightening spirits was viewed with apprehension in Iran.⁹⁵ At Persepolis, the so-called “Royal Hero” grapples with a winged lion with eagle’s feet and a scorpion’s tail, and in this context, the composite beast represents a demonic power, perhaps Angra Mainyu himself.[§] That Cyrus paid no attention to the local perception of the odd-looking figures that he chose to have engraved on the walls of his palace attests to the single-minded focus with which he wished to declare his appropriation of Assyrian symbols associated with kingship and power.⁹⁶ The remains of a third relief

from Palace S show the bare feet of two long-robed individuals conducting a hoofed animal; it has been interpreted as a tribute scene of the sort encountered frequently at Persepolis and in Assyrian palace art.



Reconstruction of Palace S at Pasargadae.

Palace P was the private pavilion where Cyrus planned to hold banquets and smaller receptions; but the building was largely unfinished when Cyrus died and was only completed under Darius.⁹⁷ Its most notable feature is the fixed granite throne platform that stands at the center of an exceptionally long front portico. This location would have afforded Cyrus a panoramic view of his central garden, before which he could “contemplate the trees, grasses, and streams” during the few quiet moments that he had.⁹⁸ The doorway reliefs at Palace P are badly damaged, such that only the lower halves of the figures remain. But there is enough to suggest a portrayal of Cyrus, in full regalia, exiting his palace followed by an attendant carrying either a fly-whisk or parasol to shield the monarch from the sun. The similarity of these reliefs to those at Persepolis has led several scholars to suggest that the former were actually commissioned by Darius, under whom palace art became extremely stylized.⁹⁹ But there is compelling reason to believe

that Cyrus himself commissioned the sculptures at Palace P, and it is telling that the conqueror spared no expense in gracing his own image, for the crown and parts of the robe were originally covered in gold leaf.¹⁰⁰

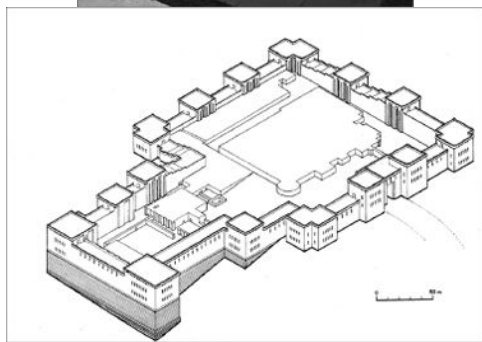
The windowless square tower known as the Zendan-e Soleiman stands to the north of the palace complex. Only its front edifice remains, but its resemblance to the so-called Ka'ba-ye Zartusht, or "Cube of Zoroaster," which Darius built at Naqsh-e Rostam, is undeniable. The intended function of these structures remains a mystery. Scholarly consensus is divided as to whether they served as temple towers of the type known from Urartian art, tombs for extended members of the royal family, or as storage houses where important artifacts and items of dynastic paraphernalia were kept. The latter two functions seem the most likely as each building lacked the ventilation necessary to house a fire-altar.¹⁰¹



Doorway relief from Persepolis showing the king followed by attendants carrying a parasol and fly-whisk. Some scholars believe that Cyrus introduced scenes of this sort into Near Eastern art, implementing them for the first time on the doorways of Palace P.

In the northwest corner of the plain, somewhat removed from the buildings described so far, Cyrus erected two square plinths for ritualistic purposes. It seems noteworthy that these plinths resemble those depicted in bas-relief on the tombs of Darius I and his successors at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis. Each such relief portrays the deceased king praying before a raised fire-altar from atop an elevated platform. That the Pasargadae plinths were intended for similar usage is suggested by the fact that only one of the two plinths is accessible by a flight of stairs. Scholars have treated this detail as extremely important, for it

supports the theory that Cyrus and Darius shared the same religion.¹⁰² At minimum, the exposed plinths recall Herodotus' statement that the Persians sacrificed to the gods in open places.¹⁰³ It was presumably from atop the large hill separating the sacred precinct from the other structures at Pasargadae that Cyrus and future Achaemenid kings made special and lavish offerings to Ahuramazda in celebration of military victories; if we may judge the testimony of the classical authors, the flames and smoke produced by these sacrifices could be seen from many miles away.¹⁰⁴



Left: The Ka'ba-ye Zartosht at Naqsh-e Rostam. *Right:* Reconstruction of the Tal-e Takht at Pasargadae as it looked in Achaemenid and Seleucid times. The shaded region denotes all that was constructed during Cyrus'

reign.

Farther to the east and rising to a height of approximately 160 feet above the surface of the plain was the Tal-e Takht, or “Throne Hill.” Here, Cyrus began work on a massive citadel, known in Islamic times as the Takht-e Madar-e Soleiman. Had they been completed, two monumental staircases would have provided access to the Takht’s elevated terrace, the design of which seems to have been inspired by Sardis’ imposing acropolis.¹⁰⁵ Cyrus apparently intended to construct upon this terrace a special complex of palaces for use on ceremonial occasions, as Darius later did at Persepolis. However, work on the Pasargadae terrace was never completed, quite possibly because the Persians deemed the new construction inauspicious following the deaths of Cyrus and his sons.¹⁰⁶ Darius and his successors maintained the Takht as a giant storehouse.

Pasargadae must have resembled a vast construction yard during the final decade of Cyrus’ reign. The work teams would have been recruited from every major province of the empire, as well as from the Persian peasantry. Specific tasks would have been assigned to those peoples with a demonstrated expertise in the work.¹⁰⁷ Still, the project must have experienced many inefficiencies and delays, given that the Persians were relative novices at monumental architecture. However, one structure that Cyrus must have insisted upon finishing relatively early on was his tomb.

This monument, the most famous and well preserved of those at Pasargadae, has challenged archaeologists for over a century. It measures about

thirty-five feet tall and dominates the landscape. It consists of a rectangular stone chamber with a gabled roof, set upon a stepped platform with seven tiers. The entire structure is composed of carefully carved blocks of limestone, held together by iron clamps. According to some archaeologists, the ziggurats of Mesopotamia and Elam provided the original inspiration for the tomb's curious design.¹⁰⁸ Other experts have found in its gabled roof a relic of Nordic architecture, dating back to when the Iranians lived in the snowbound steppes of Eurasia.¹⁰⁹ Still others have claimed that the tomb replicates the monumental palaces of Urartu, the roofs of which were also gabled.¹¹⁰ Despite such speculation, the earliest parallels to Cyrus' tomb exist in Anatolia; however, it is unclear whether these examples predate the tomb at Pasargadae.¹¹¹

One remarkable feature of the tomb is the sole carving with which it was adorned. Located above the entrance and directly below the gable end, is the image of a rosette, or a rosette and sunburst, divided into three parts: an outer circle of pointed petals or solar rays, a middle circle of twenty-four rounded petals, and an inner circle of twelve large petals.¹¹² No exact parallel for this design exists, and it has been explained as a Mithraic symbol denoting the presence of the Royal Glory, a Zoroastrian emblem of the Amesha Spenta Ameretat ("Immortality"), or a "decorative echo of the end of a ridge beam that once typified wooden structures of this gabled form."¹¹³

Cyrus' tomb was probably the first structure to be completed at Pasargadae, and this must have made for an ominous reminder about the brevity of human life. According to the classical authors, the tomb stood in the middle of a man-made grove planted with all

kinds of trees. Here, future generations of Persian boys received instruction in archery, horseback riding, and truth-speaking. The great conqueror had chosen his final resting place well.

The structures that Cyrus built at Pasargadae are significant on several counts, but primarily because they represent the earliest known manifestations of Achaemenid imperial art. As we have seen, this art had disparate origins, with elements borrowed from the Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians, Elamites, Urartians, and others. This adoption of foreign styles highlights the creative genius of the Persians, for at Pasargadae, “all foreign influences had been recast and transposed in a coherent and balanced manner” to create a new Persian art of the highest order.¹¹⁴

But it was the intimate association with Cyrus that kept Pasargadae in honor and use throughout the Achaemenid period. All future Achaemenid kings were coronated at Pasargadae, and the women of the town received a gold coin whenever the royal caravan passed through due to the role that their female ancestors had played during Cyrus’ last great battle with the Medes.¶ The evidence of a lost Tibetan map prepared around 300 BCE indicates that, even after Darius founded Persepolis, ancient Persian cartographers – and map-makers in countries such as Tibet who followed Persian geographical conventions – situated Pasargadae, and more specifically the tomb that housed Cyrus’ remains, at the center of the world.¹¹⁵

****** The mention in Darius’ Suez inscription of the “Sea that goes from Persia” is the earliest known reference to the Persian Gulf as belonging to or affiliated with the Iranians. Before the Achaemenid period, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia knew the Persian Gulf as the “Lower Sea,” and Nabonidus, the last Neo-Babylonian emperor, had

a governor in Bahrain, which presumably passed to Cyrus with the rest of Nabonidus' domain in 539 BCE. During the Achaemenid period, the Persian Gulf was a cultural melting pot, where Iranian, Elamite, Mesopotamian, Arabian, and Indian traditions merged.

† Since the early 1920s, Pasargadae has been studied by various scholars, including Ernst Herzfeld, Sir Aurel Stein, Eric Schmidt, Ali Sami, David Stronach, and Remy Boucharlat. The most comprehensive study of the site occurred between 1961 and 1963, under the direction of David Stronach of the British Institute of Persian Studies. The description of the site provided in this chapter is based largely on Stronach (1978) and (1985b).

‡ See Appendix XIV for the significance of this practice.

§ See Appendix XX.

¶ See page 88.

With Horse and Bow: The Ancient Persian Army

*Din of horses, crash of towers,
Sack of cities – these were ours.*

—Words spoken by the Persian chorus in Aeschylus’
The Persians

Cyrus’ was a world of war. The mighty conqueror had spent nearly two-thirds of his reign on the march, during which time he had achieved a string of victories that none before and few since have matched. Such dedication to military matters was only natural for the ruler of a nation that viewed war as a sacred enterprise, the ultimate test of a man’s spirit, and a task that must end only in victory.

Although the scope of Cyrus’ conquests attests to the fortitude of the Persian army, very little is known about this fighting force. The persistent image we have of it is that which the classical authors present of a poorly drilled mob incapable of withstanding a disciplined hoplite phalanx. This skewed image reflects an important bias in the sources that modern authorities occasionally neglect. The most detailed

primary accounts of Persian military practices occur in the histories of Xerxes I's invasion of Greece (480–479 BCE) and Alexander's overthrow of the Persian Empire (334–330 BCE). Not only were these two of the best documented military enterprises of early antiquity, but they both ended in Persian defeats. The resulting impression is that the Persian army was easily beatable, which it was not. Further distorting our perspective is the fact that many classical authors actively perpetrated the stereotype of Persian military incompetence to satisfy their own ideological agendas.¹ Herodotus did so to magnify the military achievements of the Greeks and to support his thesis that wealthy, despotic societies make men soft and cravenly. Xenophon followed suit in the final book of the *Cyropaedia* to distinguish between the hardy, aspiring Persians of his idealistic treatise and the supposedly degenerate Persians of his own day. It bears emphasis that Herodotus and Xenophon each had strong ties to Athens, at times when the city chafed under military or political pressure applied by Persia.** Another writer who contributed to the stereotype of Persian military incompetence was the fourth century BCE Athenian orator Isocrates. Finally, the Greek historian Ephorus, a student of Isocrates with strong anti-Persian leanings, related numerous, almost comical anecdotes of Persian military weakness that some scholars have unfortunately treated as authoritative.

It is indisputable that the Persians had difficulty fighting against hoplite phalanxes. However, this does not diminish from the repeated victories achieved by Cyrus and other Persian kings over the Medes, Babylonians, Lydians, Greeks, Sakas, and eastern

Iranians. These victories were no mean feats, and the gist of Herodotus' claim that, for many decades, the Greeks flinched at the mere sight of a Persian soldier must have held true for many a nation.² Indeed, the Persian Empire could hardly have attained its far-flung borders or protected them, more or less successfully, for over two hundred years without a strong military.³

The Persian Standing Army

One of Cyrus' great military accomplishments was transforming the Persian tribal host into a permanent, standing army.⁴ Herodotus provides that when Cyrus first incited the Persians to revolt his army consisted of all the able-bodied men of the Pasargadae, Maspian, and Maraphian tribes. Although Herodotus does not specifically say so, the implication is that within this tribal host each chieftain commanded his own kinsmen in the field.⁵ This arrangement limited the army's effectiveness in various ways. Not only were infantry and cavalry jumbled together within each tribal division, but the army as a whole lacked uniform arms and armor, as each soldier was responsible for procuring his own equipment. The tribal method of military organization further restricted the army's ability to operate over the course of the year. Most tribal warriors were farmers or pastoralists who had crops or herds to tend to back home. Military activity was thus limited to a fixed campaign season that typically fell between March and September, with soldiers generally unavailable during other times of the year.

The *Cyropaedia* describes the steps that Cyrus took to create the Persian standing army.⁶ First, he outfitted each Persian commoner under his command with arms that only a noble could afford. He then organized his army into companies and appointed as officers those chieftains who regularly furnished the best troops. Next, he revamped his chariot corps and provided horses to the Persian nobles, so that they could fight as cavaliers like their Median counterparts.⁷ Finally, he organized an elite guard of ten thousand spearmen and stationed garrisons in the empire's main cities.⁸ It was only by the end of Cyrus' reign that the Persian standing army was substantially established. The concept of a tribal host did not disappear altogether, however, and tribal levies always bolstered the regular army during large-scale mobilizations. However, the core of the Achaemenid army and the garrison troops that controlled the empire's distant provinces consisted of that class of professional soldiers that Cyrus created. These troops had their arms and armor paid for by the state and received regular salaries, mostly in kind, and, in some cases, pensions in the form of land grants. The institutionalization of the military in this manner was typical of ascendant empires and had already occurred in Media during Cyaxares' reign. Cyrus presumably expanded upon Cyaxares' military reforms and introduced them to Persia.⁹

The three main tactical arms of the Persian army were the infantry, cavalry, and chariotry. These embodied the complete military heritage of the early Iranians. Bronze Age Indo-European armies consisted of elite warriors fighting in horse-drawn chariots followed by masses of armed infantry. By the dawn of

the Iron Age, around the time the Persians migrated to the Iranian plateau, true cavalry had evolved in Central Asia and Southern Russia, and the Iranians helped popularize mounted warfare throughout the Near East.

Persian Infantry

Infantry was generally the most important component of any ancient army. Although in the more propagandistic, biased portions of his narrative Herodotus describes the Persian infantry as a poorly organized mob, lacking good arms and armor, and driven to battle under the lash, he elsewhere states that Persian infantry could hold its own against hoplite phalanxes and feared Scythian cavalry.¹⁰ That this latter image is closer to the truth seems probable in light of Persian military achievements over the course of two centuries and the testimony of Plutarch, who, in describing the Battle of Cunaxa in 401 BCE, states: “The very manner in which [the Persian king] led his men, silently and slowly, made the Grecians stand amazed at his good discipline; who had expected irregular shouting and leaping, much confusion and separation between one body of men and another.”¹¹

A good place to begin in evaluating the Persian infantry's attire is Herodotus' catalog of the army that Xerxes led to Greece in 480 BCE.[†] Many scholars believe that Herodotus reproduced this catalog from an authentic Persian document or a lost work of the Ionian geographer Hecataeus. The catalog provides

that Persian infantrymen wore a hood (which the Greeks called a tiara), “embroidered tunic with sleeves, a coat of [iron] mail looking like the scales of a fish, and trousers; for arms they carried light wicker shields, quivers slung below them, short spears, powerful bows with cane arrows, and daggers swinging from belts beside the right thigh.”¹² According to Herodotus, the Persians derived this costume from the Medes, who in turn had adopted it from the Scythians and Sakas; variations of this “Median costume” existed throughout northern and eastern Iran.

The key piece of Persian defensive equipment mentioned in the catalog is the coat of mail, which was made by sewing rows of small iron or bronze scales into a felt or leather backing.¹³ This armor was apparently strong enough to deflect arrows, slashing weapons, and spear thrusts.¹⁴ However, its weight posed an impediment, and in the wide plains of Asia, speed and mobility were necessary on the battlefield. For this reason, not all Persian infantrymen wore heavy metal armor. Some wore quilted linen corselets, while others donned composite leather and fabric cuirasses – similar to those used by certain hoplites – or even no armor at all.¹⁵

Herodotus, in fact, seems to have simplified his description of the Persian infantry’s apparel, for he fails to differentiate between the military attire worn by various categories of troops. The Persians fielded both heavy and light infantry.[‡] The heavy infantry carried either tall wicker shields or wooden “figure-eight” shields of the sort depicted in the Persepolis reliefs, wore metal or quilted fabric body armor, and wielded, as their primary offensive weapon, a spear

measuring approximately seven to eight feet long.¹⁶ Some heavy infantrymen were also armed with bows and wore metal helmets. The Greeks do not mention such headgear in connection with Persian infantry. But Achaemenid period seal engravings depict foot soldiers wearing round helmets (always together with body armor), and archaeologists have found several examples of metallic Iranian headgear, the most famous being a conical Assyrian-style bronze helmet discovered at Olympus, Greece, with the inscription “taken from the Medes” (the Greeks presumably dedicated the helmet to the temple of Zeus following the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE).¹⁷

Despite the presence within the Persian army of heavily armed melee troops such as those described above, the vast majority of Persian foot soldiers served as light infantry. These were mostly archers, whose only offensive weapon, aside from the short sword or ax, was the bow. Visual sources show two types of bows used by Iranian troops. One was a long, single-curved bow, which appears to have been of Elamite design. The other was the more popular double-curved composite bow. The composite bow originated among the steppe nomads and had an effective range of 200 to 300 yards.¹⁸ Some archers wore corselets and carried small leather bucklers, but the majority lacked any defensive equipment. Their safety depended upon the shield-bearing troops who stood ahead of them in the infantry file. In addition to archers who fought in orderly formations, Persian light infantry included a class of soldiers equivalent to Greek peltasts. These unarmored skirmishers carried light spherical or crescent-shaped shields, javelins, swords, and slings.¹⁹ They probably fought in loose formations, given that

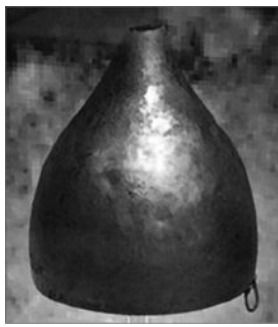
their role was simply to impede the advance of enemy units. For headgear, Persian light infantry wore the old nomadic riding hood or tiara, which was made of felt or cloth and had flaps that the soldier could pull over his mouth. It functioned mainly to shield the face from dust and sand (an essential consideration in Asia). Because the Greeks first encountered the tiara among the Cimmerian tribes of Asia Minor, they called it the “Phrygian cap.”

All Persian soldiers carried short swords, daggers, or machete-like falchions. The first two weapons were used for stabbing; the last was for slashing. Herodotus renders the name of the Persian short sword as *akinakes*, which reflects an Old Iranian root **kin*, or “revenge.” This blade seems to have evolved from a dueling weapon. In the *Shahnameh*, heroic duels often culminate in wrestling bouts that end when the champion pins his enemy to the ground and stabs him in the stomach. The manner in which the *akinakes* was worn supports such usage. The scabbard was always strapped diagonally to the right thigh so that the sword could be drawn quickly with the blade facing down. The *akinakes* originated among the steppe nomads and was widely used throughout Iran and eastern Anatolia. Persian infantry also wielded single-edged battle-axes, identical to the Scythian *sagaris*.

How the different classes of Persian infantry were arrayed in battle is not entirely clear, but the evidence suggests that a typical infantry formation of a hundred soldiers consisted of ten side-by-side files, each extending ten-men deep.²⁰ Within each file, one or two spearmen with wicker shields stood at the front (these shields could be propped up on the ground and joined with other shields to form barricades, from behind

which Persian archers could fire arrows).²¹ They were followed by one or two spearmen carrying figure-eight shields and then by archers.²² This reconstruction is speculative, of course, and the possibility exists that the bearers of figure-eight and wicker shields never participated within the same formation and that each such soldier constituted the front line of a different formation. But either way, the infantrymen in the front ranks were always equipped with armor, shield, and spear, and this made them a match in hand-to-hand combat for most foes. On the other hand, assuming they lacked shields, the soldiers in the rear ranks were extremely vulnerable in melee combat against intact formations of shield-bearing infantry. Ideally, these troops engaged in close-quarters combat only after the enemy had broken ranks and fled.





Left: The Royal Bow-Bearer of Xerxes I as shown on a relief from Persepolis. He carries a *sagaris* ax in his right hand and a bag full of armor and weapons, including the king's bow, in his left. His *akinakes*, or short sword, is sheathed in a finely engraved scabbard strapped to his right thigh. Among the Persians, ornate weapons, such as these, were coveted prestige items. *Right:* Parthian brass helmet. Achaemenid soldiers may have worn such headgear under their felt or cloth hoods. Below it is a Persian bronze helmet dedicated to the temple of Zeus after the Battle of Marathon. The helmet resembles the headgear worn by Assyrian soldiers and attests to the far-ranging influence of Assyrian military conventions.

The Ten Thousand Immortals

The vaunted Ten Thousand Immortals comprised the elite corps of Persian infantry.²³ According to Herodotus, “this corps was known as the Immortals, because it was invariably kept up to strength; if a man was killed or fell sick, the vacancy he left was at once filled, so that its strength was never more or less than 10,000.”²⁴ The Immortals traveled exclusively with the king and were excluded from the normal chain of command. They were organized into ten regiments of a thousand, with the members of the top regiment distinguished by golden, pomegranate-shaped counterweights on the butts of their spears (the rest of the Immortals used silver pomegranates as

counterweights). The best of the Immortals were recruited into the ranks of the “Apple-Bearers,” the king’s personal bodyguard.²⁵ These soldiers were so named because their spears had golden, apple-shaped counterweights. Their leader was the famous *Hazarapati*, or “Commander of a Thousand,” who may have also held the ceremonial title “Royal Spear-Bearer.”[§]

Much has been written about the Immortals’ origins. Some scholars believe that Darius I formed the corps from the veterans of the army with which he reconquered the rebellious provinces in 522–521 BCE.²⁶ However, this interpretation contradicts the information in the sources. Xenophon credits Cyrus with establishing the Immortals corps, and Heracleides of Cyme provides that the Median kings called their bodyguards “Apple-Bearers.”²⁷ We should probably interpret this evidence to show that Cyrus adopted the institution of a permanent corps of “Immortal” warriors from the Medes.²⁸ It is interesting that the classical authors maintain that all the Immortals were ethnically Persian, whereas Achaemenid reliefs depict members of the Immortals in Persian, Median, and Elamite dress. Perhaps only the Apple-Bearers were exclusively Persian.

Whatever the truth regarding their origins and ethnicity, the Immortals were the pride of the Persian army. Among the later Achaemenids, Xerxes boasted of the Immortals’ devotion and claimed that each Immortal was worth three Spartan hoplites in battle; similarly, Darius II acknowledged the Greek Polydamus’ claim to be the greatest warrior in the world only after Polydamus had slain three Immortals in gladiatorial contests.²⁹ Given their exalted status,

the Immortals carried only the finest arms. We may imagine them marching into battle attired like the elite shock troops of the Assyrian army, with long coats of gold-plated mail reaching to the knee and pointed iron helmets. Herodotus provides: “Of all the troops in the army [the Immortals] were adorned with the greatest magnificence, and they were likewise the most valiant. Besides their arms . . . they glittered all over with gold, vast quantities of which they wore about their persons. They were followed by litters, wherein rode their concubines, and by a numerous train of attendants handsomely dressed. Camels and sumpter-beasts carried their provision, apart from that of the other soldiers.”³⁰ Quintus Curtius Rufus also mentions the magnificent golden raiments worn by the Immortals, a tradition that continued into Sasanid times, when the corps was revived: “No other group was as splendidly bedecked in Barbarian opulence: golden necklaces, clothes interwoven with gold, long-sleeved tunics actually studded with jewels.”³¹ As for their concubines accompanying them on campaign, it was really a disciplinary tactic. Soldiers normally satisfied their sexual urges during war by raping female captives or soliciting prostitutes; such behavior was unseemly for the king’s chosen guard, hence the special privilege.³²

Persian Cavalry

Feared though the Immortals were, what set the Persian army apart from other contemporary militaries was its superior cavalry. Herodotus states that Persian horsemen were armed identically to the

infantry, except that certain divisions wore helmets of beaten brass or steel.³³ Again, some additional detail is necessary.

Like the infantry, the Persian cavalry was divided into different classes. The majority consisted of lightly armed horse-archers who rode fast ponies or small horses. Their ability to fire arrows while retreating, a skill learned from the Scythians and Sakas, made them difficult to engage at close quarters.



Author's rendering of an early Achaemenid armored cavalryman and a shield-bearing member of the Ten Thousand Immortals.

A fifth century BCE Babylonian tablet contains an

inventory of equipment that we may assume describes the arms and armor carried by most heavy cavalymen in Cyrus' army: "An iron corselet, armored headgear, a cloth neck-protector, a cloth hat, a leather quiver with copper attachments, 120 'ready' arrows, 10 'reserve' arrows, an iron sword in a leather sheath, two iron lances."³⁴ To avoid interference with riding, most Persian cavalry went to battle without shields. This practice was typical of other ancient cavalry, including those of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Greeks. On the other hand, some Scythian and Saka horsemen carried light leather or wicker shields that were usually slung across the rider's back. Given the substantial military influence that these nomads exerted upon the western Iranians, a small minority of Persian horsemen may have used such shields, too.³⁵ The later classical authors mention entire divisions of Persian heavy cavalry in which both horse and rider were completely covered in mail. Whether Cyrus' army included such horsemen is unclear. Artistic representations of Persian cavalry with armored horses do not appear before the end of the fifth century BCE, and most literary references postdate this time.³⁶ Nevertheless, Herodotus indicates that the Massagetae fitted their horses with bronze breastplates during the sixth century BCE, and the last Assyrian kings fielded mounted squadrons, in which helmeted riders donned corselets and horses were draped in fabric armor.³⁷ Cyrus' army presumably contained similar contingents, even if it lacked those in which both horse and rider were encased in metal from head to toe.

The heavy cavalry's mounts had to be much larger and stronger than regular warhorses, and this is where

the famous Nisayan breed came into play. Because heavy cavalry served primarily as shock troops, Nisayans were trained to kick and bite at enemy soldiers.³⁸ The Persians took great pride in their warhorses and harnessed them with magnificent trappings and bridle ornaments, including crests and colorful ribbons. They further beautified their steeds by braiding their tails and manes.



Achaemenid heavy cavalry gave rise to the cataphracts and clibanarii of the Parthian and Sasanid periods. These heavy cavalrymen, who went to battle completely covered in lamellar armor or chain mail, were, in turn, the predecessors of the medieval European knight. Indeed, European cavalry developed significantly during the Roman and Byzantine periods in response to the equestrian practices of various Iranian groups, including not just the Parthians and Sasanids of the Iranian plateau, but the Scythians, Alans, and Sarmatians of the Eurasian steppe. The

horseman shown here is the seventh century CE Sasanid ruler Khosrow II. The halo around his head signifies the *Farnah*, or Royal Glory.

Despite the heavy cavalryman's menacing appearance and fearsome steed, the absence of stirrups, which had not yet been invented, limited his utility on the battlefield. Without a footrest to help maintain his balance, the heavy cavalryman was precariously perched atop his mount and "kept his seat only through the pressure of his knees."³⁹ He ran a serious risk of unhorsing himself whenever he delivered a blow with his weapon or grappled with his enemies.⁴⁰ Such factors, as well as tactical considerations favoring speed and agility on the battlefield, prohibited the widespread use of heavy cavalry in the early Persian army.

Thus, for shock cavalry, Cyrus generally relied upon an intermediate class of mounted warriors who were more heavily armed than simple horse-archers but less so than the type of cavalryman described in the Babylonian tablet. These horsemen are commonly depicted in Greek and Persian art and appear in such famous works as the Alexander Mosaic. They wore riding hoods instead of helmets, and cuirasses made of quilted linen or leather with iron scales. Their main weapon was the lance or, more usually, two javelins made of cornel wood – one for throwing, the other for stabbing.⁴¹ Bows, arrows, and slashing weapons, such as single-edged swords or battle-axes, rounded out their arsenal.

As with the infantry, the Persians fielded squadrons of elite cavalry. Herodotus mentions a corps of ten thousand cavalrymen, who were, perhaps,

identical to the magnificently clad “Kinsmen Cavalry” of the Alexander historians.⁴² Another unit of a thousand horsemen represented the “King’s Own” or “Royal Squadron” of cavalry.

Persian Chariots

Although the rise of cavalry warfare around the turn of the first millennium BCE made chariots increasingly obsolete, the Achaemenids persisted in using chariots until the fall of their empire. An inscription of Darius I from Susa tellingly praises Ahuramazda for endowing his kingdom not just with “good men” and “good horses,” but also with “good charioteers.”⁴³

In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon asserts that Cyrus resurrected chariot warfare when he invented the scythed chariot to combat Croesus’ heavy infantry.⁴⁴ Cyrus deemed this innovation necessary because, throughout antiquity, cavalry, no matter how heavily armed, was generally incapable of penetrating a closed formation of spear-bearing infantry.⁴⁵ Xenophon provides a detailed description of how these chariots were built and used:

He had chariots of war constructed with strong wheels so that they might not easily be broken, and with long axles; for anything broad is less likely to be overturned. The box for the driver he constructed out of strong timbers in the form of a turret; and this rose in height to the driver’s elbows, so that they could manage the horses by reaching over the top of the box; and besides, he covered the drivers with mail, all except their eyes. On both sides of the wheels, moreover, he attached to the axles steel scythes about two cubits [approximately three feet] long, and beneath the axles [under the car] other

scythes pointing downward toward the ground; this was arranged with the intention of hurling the chariots into the midst of the enemy.⁴⁶

Xenophon states that Cyrus protected his chariot horses with bronze head and breast armor, and sheets of mail fastened around the horses' backs and sides.⁴⁷

A macabre passage from Quintus Curtius Rufus describes the devastation that properly deployed scythed chariots could inflict on opposing infantry: "The charioteers charged at full speed in order to increase the [enemy] casualties by taking them by surprise, and accordingly some [of the enemy] were killed by the spears that projected well beyond the chariot-poles and others dismembered by the scythes set on either side . . . The ground was littered with the severed limbs of soldiers and, as there was no pain while the wounds were still warm, the men did not in fact drop their weapons, despite the mutilation and their weakness, until they dropped dead from loss of blood."⁴⁸

The Persians also used conventional war-chariots. These vehicles tended to be lighter and faster than scythed chariots and were usually drawn by two horses instead of four. It is unclear whether the Persians used these vehicles, like scythed chariots, to break enemy spear-lines or, alternatively, to pursue routed foes. However, we do know that conventional chariots often served as command vehicles. The Avestan term for "warrior," *rathaeshtar*, literally means "one who stands in a chariot," and because deep-rooted military traditions die hard, the Persians appreciated the symbolic value of having their leaders stand in chariots during important engagements. The fifth century BCE Athenian playwright Aeschylus, a

veteran of the Persian Wars, mentions the king's famous "Syrian" chariot.⁴⁹ This was a large ornamental vehicle, the sides of which were "embossed with gold and silver representations of the gods" and "the yoke . . . studded with flashing gems . . . and a consecrated eagle made of gold with wings outstretched."⁵⁰

Training, Auxiliaries, and Organization

The soldiers of the Persian standing army received rigorous training, similar to that afforded the Spartans in Greece. Strabo describes this regimen, stating that male Persians were prepared since childhood for a lifetime in the field.⁵¹ The drill masters "wake the boys up before dawn by the sound of brazen instruments, and assemble them in one place . . . and then they divide the boys into companies of fifty, appoint one of the sons of the king or of a satrap as leader of each company, and order them to follow their leader in a race, having marked off a distance of [approximately ten miles]." In addition to weapons-training, the cadets received instruction in the "use of their lungs," including "loud speaking" and "breathing," as well as in swimming and "the crossing of torrential streams in such a way as to keep both armor and clothing dry." Survival skills, such as "enduring heat and cold and rains" and identifying edible fruits like "pistachios, acorns, and wild pears," were also stressed. According to Xenophon, the boys performed police duty and other tasks requiring "strength and dispatch" before entering into active service.⁵² If we may trust Nicholas Sekunda's interpretation of the classical sources, the

period of mandatory military service spanned the ages of twenty to twenty-four.⁵³ Thereafter, those soldiers who were not promoted into the ranks of the officers or elite guard units were deactivated. Deactivated soldiers remained liable for reserve duty until they were approximately fifty years old.

In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon states that “the Persians number about one hundred and twenty thousand men.”⁵⁴ Scholars have interpreted this figure to represent the total population of male Persians available for military service during the fourth century BCE. The number was presumably lower in Cyrus’ day, and whatever it was, a good portion must have consisted of inactive reserves, while most active soldiers ostensibly served in the satrapies or in garrisons back home.⁵⁵ Cyrus consequently needed to augment the Persian standing army with trained soldiers from closely related tribes.

The Medes played a significant role in this connection. The Medes shared the Persians’ zeal for battle and had more experience in cavalry and siege warfare. The core of Cyrus’ imperial army consisted of both Median and Persian troops, and this military partnership continued for many decades. In the Bisutun Inscription, Darius I describes the force he commanded as “that Persian and Median army that was with me,” and Median soldiers figured prominently in the Persian Wars.

In addition to the Medes, large numbers of Elamites and eastern Iranians served in the imperial army.[¶] Spearmen in Elamite dress appear frequently in Achaemenid art, and both the Old Testament and classical authors mention Elamites among the empire’s crack troops. Eastern Iranians are known to have

served in imperial garrisons as far afield as Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and, later, Egypt. The Greek authors are quite explicit about the special role that eastern Iranians played within the imperial army.⁵⁶ Aeschylus describes the Bactrians as the bravest allies of the Persians, and Herodotus ranks the Bactrians and Sakas as the king's most trusted warriors after the Persians and Medes.⁵⁷ Xenophon singles out the Hyrcanians for praise, remarking that they often attained positions of leadership and trust within the imperial army due to their voluntary submission to Cyrus.⁵⁸ According to Ali Reza Shahbazi, the eastern Iranians paid proportionally less taxes to the central government than other subject peoples but, in return, provided more men for military service.⁵⁹ The singular devotion of the eastern Iranians to the Achaemenid royal house and their willingness to take up arms in the name of the king no doubt facilitated their inclusion within the army.⁶⁰

Yet, even with the ardent support of the Medes, Elamites, and eastern Iranians, the empire's standing forces were relatively modest in size. Each satrapy had approximately 10,000 to 12,000 active troops quartered within its borders. Moreover, most modern authorities agree that the king had only the 10,000 Immortals, the 1,000 Apple-Bearers, and a 1,000 or so household cavalry in the way of a military force constantly in his presence and available for a campaign. These forces comprised the so-called "army that goes around with the king," which Isocrates mentions in his *Panegyricus*.⁶¹ For large-scale expeditions, Cyrus required forces four to seven times as large. He could perhaps call upon another 10,000 to 20,000 standing troops to supplement the nucleus

of household soldiers but not much more, for he could not risk depleting his garrisons due to the constant threat of revolt. Major mobilizations thus required auxiliaries, such as mercenaries and irregular troops pressed into service.

For mercenaries, Cyrus looked primarily to the wild hill peoples living within the borders of his empire.⁶² He also hired mercenaries from among the nomadic tribes living beyond the empire's frontiers; this included the Central Asian Sakas and the Arabs who inhabited the desert between Syria and Egypt.^{***} Whereas soldiers in direct military service usually received salaries in the form of food rations, payments to mercenaries were typically made in silver and gold.⁶³ Mercenaries thus had to purchase their own foodstuffs, which they generally did from merchants who traveled alongside the imperial armies.⁶⁴ Mercenaries whose service did not terminate upon the conclusion of a campaign usually performed garrison duty, and some were hired exclusively for this purpose.

Much has been written about Achaemenid methods of military conscription. As stated above, adult Persian males were eligible for military duty until about the age of fifty. The Bisutun Inscription alludes to the existence of reserve troops in Media and Persia that held land in exchange for military service, and these reserves were ostensibly conscripted according to feudal principles, whereby landowners raised soldiers from among the men bound to their estates. This system of conscription resembled that which existed in medieval Europe, where landed noblemen served as knights and peasants as squires or infantry. The Iranian system carried over to the

satrapies, where Persian and Median aristocrats received estates from the king.

Linguistic evidence suggests the existence of a distinct method of conscription based on the institution of ethnic colonies called *hatrus* in Akkadian. Each *hatru* had an area of approximately seventy acres and was collectively owned by soldiers of a common nationality.⁶⁵ The *hatru* consisted of up to three types of lesser fiefs.⁶⁶ The smallest fief was the “bow-land,” so named because its owners had to supply a single infantryman to the levy. The “horse-land” was a larger fief, the owners of which had to furnish a cavalryman or its equivalent (multiple infantrymen); meanwhile the largest fief was the “chariot-land,” a somewhat anachronistic title given the diminished tactical significance of the chariot. *Hatru*-conscription seems to have worked effectively during the early Achaemenid period, while the original colonists cultivated their plots and the requirement to supply soldiers was strictly enforced. But the system deteriorated toward the end of the fifth century BCE, by which time most *hatrus* could no longer sustain the numerous descendants of the original colonists, who could not legally divest themselves of the military and fiscal obligations incidental to land ownership.⁶⁷ The concept of the *hatru* apparently originated in either Babylonia or Assyria, whence it spread to Media. Under Cyrus, the Persians adopted the institution from the Medes and, then, reintroduced it, with modifications, to Mesopotamia. The titles of the various *hatru* fiefs and the allocation of *hatrus* to foreign colonists thus reflect Iranian innovations unattested in earlier Mesopotamian practice.⁶⁸

Cyrus and his successors did not limit themselves to levying troops from the estates of wealthy Iranian noblemen and military colonies. The Achaemenids demanded soldiers from all feudal authorities within their empire, as well as from nomadic tribes under firm imperial control. Accordingly, pastoral tribes, local aristocrats, and landowning institutions (such as Babylonian temples) all had to provide troops when the royal summons went out.⁶⁹ In general, the Persians avoided conscripting peasants, preferring, instead, to raise troops from local warrior castes.⁷⁰ However, the Persians did not always abide by this practice. During times of crisis, even untrained peasants had to fight. The earliest reference to a thorough military levy occurs in Herodotus' account of Cyrus' expedition against King Croesus of Lydia: "Cyrus . . . had collected his army and was on his way to meet [Croesus], increasing his forces as he went by levying troops from all the peoples that lay on his route."⁷¹ Later on, Herodotus recounts that Harpagus drafted hoplites from the freshly conquered Ionian and Aeolian cities for his campaigns in southwestern Asia Minor.⁷²

Age-old Near Eastern tradition demanded that every nation in the empire provide troops when the king went on campaign. Important ideological considerations underlay this tradition. The mustering of men from tribes so diverse that "their names were unknown even [to the king] himself" enhanced the glory of the empire and reinforced the notion that the king stood at the center of the civilized world.⁷³ Exactly when the Persians adopted the practice of a "universal" levy is unclear. However, Cambyses II is known to have invaded Egypt with an army comprised

of men from “all foreign lands,” and the evidence suggests that Cyrus conducted a similarly broad levy for his campaign against Babylonia in 539 BCE.⁷⁴ Of course, the most famous universal levy of the Achaemenid period occurred in connection with Xerxes’ invasion of Greece. Herodotus’ account of this levy provides a detailed glimpse of the practice.⁷⁵ Forty-seven different nations reportedly contributed troops to Xerxes’ army (other nations provided soldiers for the fleet), and these were organized based on nationality into twenty-nine contingents of infantry, as well as cavalry, each under the command of an Iranian officer. Certain levies were well equipped, whereas others were not. Among the more exotic contingents were primitive African tribesmen, who smeared their bodies with chalk and vermilion and fought in animal skins with clubs and flint-tipped arrows; Paphlagonian hillmen, who donned helmets crested with ox horns; and “Asiatic Ethiopians,” who carried crane-skin shields and wore headdresses made from horse scalps. Herodotus relished the opportunity to criticize the Persians for senselessly diluting the core of their army with motley hordes that cared little for the empire’s welfare, and many modern scholars have reiterated the assessment, noting in particular the logistical and tactical difficulties of commanding such an ethnically diverse army. However, a close examination of the classical sources, including Herodotus, indicates that most foreign contingents never participated in actual combat.⁷⁶ For actual military operations, the king relied mainly upon his trusty Iranian and Elamite soldiers, whose fighting styles were compatible with one another. The vast majority of foreign troops thus served as mere service

personnel within the royal army. Nevertheless, the universal levy was a reality of Persian military practice and an unpopular one at that. According to Herodotus, when Gaumata the Magian laid claim to the Achaemenid throne in 522 BCE, he won favor among the subject nations by remitting their military service for three years.⁷⁷

Conscripts and mercenaries were generally responsible for procuring their own equipment and reported for weapons inspections and service at designated mustering grounds. There, they registered with the “secretaries of the army,” who assigned them to specific tactical units, within which they drilled.⁷⁸ The sources mention several locations where the Persians routinely assembled large military forces: the Castolus plain east of Sardis, the canton of Cayster in Hellespontine Phrygia, the Tarsus valley in Cilicia, Uruk in southern Babylonia, and Palestinian Acre along the border with Egypt.⁷⁹ Other locations, such as Pasargadae and Esfahan, may be identified based on historical context and the etymology of place names, and each satrapy must have contained one or more designated locations where large-scale mobilizations occurred.⁸⁰

The Persian army was well organized, perhaps better than any Asiatic military before the Mongol period.⁸¹ A strict chain of command was maintained based on the decimal system, with companies of ten, a hundred, a thousand, and ten thousand men, although smaller units of five, fifty, and five hundred men are also attested. Each company had its own commander and rallied around a unique banner or standard. Xenophon describes the royal standard as a golden eagle with splayed wings perched atop a wooden bar,

and the Alexander Mosaic shows a cloth standard near the royal chariot that was presumably emblazoned with the image of a golden eagle.⁸² Like the Romans, the Iranians seem to have clad some of their standard-bearers in animal skins; a fifth century BCE Greek red-figure bowl shows a hoplite smiting a standard-bearer in Iranian dress wearing a fox- or wolf-skin headdress.⁸³

Numbers and Battle Tactics

The Greeks axiomatically exaggerated the sizes of Persian armies, which they usually numbered in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. Many modern scholars have erroneously accepted these figures as accurate or adjusted them slightly based on arbitrary rules. The resulting impression is that the Persians generally ignored the finer details of military strategy in favor of simply overwhelming their enemies with sheer numbers. However, this view is untenable, for, although the Persian Empire possessed an immense resource of manpower, logistical considerations severely restricted the number of combatants that could participate in a given campaign. Most well-conceived modern estimates hold that an army of the Achaemenid period could have contained no more than about 80,000 soldiers.⁸⁴ Anything larger and the army would starve.⁸⁵ Furthermore, armies that campaigned predominantly in mountainous terrain tended to be significantly smaller due to the intrinsic difficulties of maneuvering a lengthy marching column and baggage train through narrow, rocky defiles. We should therefore think that Cyrus

conquered eastern Iran and Anatolia with armies of approximately 40,000 to 50,000 men, no more than a third of whom served as cavalry. Because Cyrus' enemies could typically field armies of equal or greater size, the Persian conqueror must have owed his military success to the superior arms and training of his men, as well as to the battle tactics that he and his generals employed.



Author's rendering of a Median horse-archer executing a "Parthian shot."

The classical sources offer little insight into Persian military tactics. Regarding one engagement between the Persians and Sakas, Herodotus provides: "The two sides remained at a distance from one another and shot arrows, and afterward, when all their missiles were spent, they fought hand to hand

with spears and daggers.”⁸⁶ Concerning a later battle between Persians and Greeks, the same historian relates: “When the Greeks and the Persians fought at Malene, in the country of Atarneus, there was a close-locked battle for a long time. At last the Persian horse arrived and fell upon the Greeks. It was this action of the horse that was decisive, and the Greeks were routed.”⁸⁷ Herodotus indicates that Persian cavalry could not launch successful frontal assaults upon intact formations of speared-infantry, but they could dismember such formations by attacking their sides, which were usually exposed.⁸⁸ Persian horsemen attacked in waves and, “being armed with the bow, were not easy to come to grips with; so when they moved forward, they harried all the Greek line with arrows and javelins.”⁸⁹ These and other references in the classical literature suggest that the Persians of Cyrus’ day preferred to initiate battle at a distance by having the infantry discharge arrows to weaken the enemy lines, while the main body of cavalry unleashed similar barrages upon the enemy’s flanks; only after the enemy lines were sufficiently disrupted did the chariots, reserve cavalry, and heavy infantry move in to commence the rout.⁹⁰ The Persians could afford to use such tactics because the ballistic range of their bows was often superior to that of their enemies. Furthermore, due to the relatively high proportion of archers within the Persian army – the typical infantry file consisted of mostly bowmen guarded by a few shield-bearers – the Persians fired hails of arrows so thick that they were reputed to “block out the sun.”⁹¹

These tactics proved extremely successful against Asiatic armies and even large forces of Greek hoplites operating in open areas without adequate cavalry

support.[†] However, they proved inadequate during Xerxes' war against the mainland Greeks (480–466 BCE). By then, the Greeks had learned that the key to defeating the Persian army was to engage it at close quarters as quickly as possible, to minimize the damage that Persian archers could inflict, and to induce battle in confined spaces or other locations where the dreaded Persian cavalry could not operate.

The Death Toll in Ancient Battles

Regarding the human toll during battles of this period, the overblown estimates of the Greek authors command no respect.[‡] More reliable information derives from the Bisutun Inscription, which reports the numbers of enemy casualties for the battles that Darius and his generals fought in 522–521 BCE. Most of these confrontations ended with approximately 2,000 to 6,500 enemies killed and 1,500 to 4,500 taken prisoner. Considerably higher figures appear for the most important engagements. The majority of casualties in ancient battles tended to occur during the rout, when the defeated army fell into disarray. Thus, even in a closely contested battle, the defeated army usually suffered much heavier casualties than the opposing force.

Siege Warfare and Engineering Feats

The Persians were masters of siege warfare, a military art handed down to them by the Medes, who,

in turn, had learned it from the Assyrians. Assyrian sources tell of Median armies using battering rams, scaling ladders, mines, and siege ramps to take fortified settlements, and Cyrus was no doubt familiar with all these methods. Herodotus refers to Cyrus' generals capturing the Ionian cities by constructing tall earthen mounds that enabled Persian archers to pick off enemy sentries.⁹² Concerning events of a later date, he describes the Persians' use of miners, who collapsed impregnable walls by tunneling beneath them.⁹³ Herodotus also suggests that the Persians' skill in rock climbing facilitated their capture of cities built atop mountains.⁹⁴

The Assyrians had developed various siege engines that the Persians ostensibly used. One such device, which some scholars believe inspired the Homeric tale of the Trojan horse, consisted of a large wooden frame, set on wheels and covered with wet animal skins for protection against fire. At the front of the frame was a tower, which gave the apparatus its horse-like appearance. The tower had several platforms, upon which archers were stationed, and, at its base, an opening for a battering ram that could destroy wooden gates and mud-brick walls. The Persians also devised siege engines of their own, and Herodotus comments, without going into detail, that they once brought "machines of every kind" against the city of Miletus.⁹⁵ At least during the fifth century BCE, the Persians used the bolt catapult, a large sideways bow similar to the Roman *ballista*, or "scorpion."⁹⁶ According to Xenophon, Cyrus constructed special mobile towers for the siege of Sardis. Some scholars dismiss Xenophon's claim as fantastic, but his description of these towers, which

were multi-storied and drawn by spans of oxen, recalls the Assyrian siege engine described above. So the outright dismissal of their existence during Cyrus' reign seems unwarranted. What is clear, though, is that Cyrus' towers could not have rumbled across the Zagros and Anatolian highlands on fragile wooden wheels, as Xenophon provides; like other large siege engines, they had to be built on the spot, instead.⁹⁷

Siege warfare was no less violent than conventional battles fought in the field. Assyrian reliefs convey the lengths to which the defenders of a city might go to drive the enemy back from its walls. For instance, at the siege of Lachish in 701 BCE, the desperate townspeople hurled torches, rocks, and even a chariot car set ablaze at their Assyrian assailants. Cities with both inner and outer walls, as was the case with many settlements in Media and eastern Anatolia, presented special challenges. Unless pressed for time, most besieging armies attempted to starve their enemies into submission through blockade, and the ensuing malnourishment often led to disease and pestilence. Furthermore, because the assailants in a siege were constantly on the lookout for hidden defenders, they often ransacked every house that they encountered during the street fighting that typically followed their entry into the city. In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon attributes to Cyrus an important statement concerning the use of pitch and fire to flush enemy defenders out of their homes.⁹⁸



Assyrian troops besieging a city. One soldier holds a curved shield to protect himself and his comrade, who fires an arrow. In the background, impaled prisoners dangle from stakes, and a covered battering ram on wheels assaults the city walls. The Achaemenids probably used similar siege engines.

Since the earliest times, Near Eastern armies included sizable corps of engineers, and the Persian army was no exception. The Persians were famous in antiquity for undertaking massive engineering projects in furtherance of their campaigns, although this reputation had mostly to do with the accomplishments of Cyrus' successors. § Cyrus' notable engineering feats included shallowing the Tigris River in preparation for his assault upon Babylon (539 BCE) and throwing a bridge across the Araxes during his final campaign against the Massagetae (530 BCE).

The King at War, Cyrus as a Commander

One hallmark of the Achaemenid army was the personal bravery and fighting ability of its commanders, who usually hailed from the highest ranks of the Persian aristocracy. Time and again the sources tell us of satraps, generals, and members of the royal family distinguishing themselves in combat or laying down their lives for the welfare of the empire. Such investment in military affairs was only natural for the members of a warrior class that constituted the nation's nobility. The premier member of the Persian warrior class was, of course, the king, whom tradition required to be a gifted soldier. This princely ideal finds reflection in the tomb inscription of Darius I, which states: "Inasmuch as my body has strength, as a warrior, I am a good warrior . . . Trained am I both with my hands and my feet. As a horseman, I am a good horseman. As a bowman, I am a good bowman – both on foot and on horseback. As a spearman, I am a good spearman – both on foot and on horseback. And the skills that Ahuramazda has bestowed upon me – I have been able to bear them."⁹⁹ The same expectation of martial prowess applied to Cyrus and other Achaemenid kings, who invariably took the field during important military engagements. Indeed, so much of the Persian king's legitimacy depended upon his status as a warrior that he could ill afford to remain in the palace when there was an important war to fight.

Like every other activity in which the king participated, his involvement in military matters entailed much pomp and circumstance. Herodotus indicates that the king declared war by holding court and letting an arrow or spear fly in the direction of

the enemy country.¹⁰⁰ When the king set out on campaign, he did so as part of a magnificent procession, replete with ritualistic undertones. According to Xenophon, Cyrus was the first Persian king to hold such processions, and several Greek authors describe the order of march.¹⁰¹ From these accounts, we know that the departure occurred at sunrise, when the advance-guard and baggage train exited the city gates. After a long while came the royal entourage, led by white-robed priests chanting hymns and carrying the sacred fires of the empire on silver altars. They were followed by other religious icons: teams of white Nisayan horses and the sacred chariot of Ahuramazda, which was drawn by eight white stallions. Then came the king himself, in the royal chariot, drawn by black horses of exceptional strength and beauty. On such occasions, the king's costume consisted of scarlet trousers, boots, and a purple tunic, reaching to the knees. A thick white stripe embroidered with images of fighting hawks ran down the middle of the tunic, over which was draped a cape, also dyed purple, with golden embroidery. The most distinctive element of the king's outfit was the royal headdress, the upright version of the headgear that the Greeks called the tiara; the Persians had rigid rules about the wearing of hats, and in the royal presence, everyone but the crown prince had to let his tiara droop to the side. Wrapped around the royal headdress was a blue and white ribbon, the *mitre*, which only the king and his relatives could wear. Behind the royal chariot strode the elite units of the army – the Apple-Bearers, Immortals and household cavalry – followed by the rest of the troops and a host of servants, merchants, and camp followers.

The royal tent was always pitched in the center of the camp, both to signify the centrality of the king and to minimize the amount of time necessary to relay his orders to the entire army. Such communication was achieved through the use of messengers and trumpets, and the same held true on the battlefield, where similar considerations moved the king to command from the center of the army, so that his orders could reach both flanks in the shortest period of time. In the field, the king led from his chariot or on horseback, and donned a magnificent, yet functional, panoply of metal armor. According to Xenophon, Cyrus wore a plumed helmet and bronze breastplate, and the Athenian notes that, whereas the arms of Cyrus' officers had the color of iron or bronze, the royal panoply "flashed like the reflection of a well-polished mirror."¹⁰²

What sort of military commander was Cyrus? The scarcity of reliable information concerning his campaigns precludes a detailed assessment. However, we know that he possessed a brazen personality and fought with great passion. An embellished account of his heroics survives in the works of Nicholas of Damascus, who, according to some translations, states that Cyrus and three unnamed companions personally slew over two hundred fifty Median horsemen during a skirmish at Hyrba, on the border between Persia and Media.¹⁰³ That Cyrus could be absolutely ruthless in the field is beyond doubt. Herodotus provides that, before his second battle against Croesus, Cyrus ordered his men to stop killing only when none of the enemy remained under arms. However, Xenophon heard after visiting the settlements populated by their descendants that, during the same battle, the Persian

conqueror was moved to pity by the bravery with which Croesus' Egyptian allies defended themselves and so offered them amnesty, as well as lands and cities in which to dwell.¹⁰⁴ Cyrus' appreciation for the meritorious conduct of others also manifested itself in his willingness to heed the advice of his officers. The wise counsel of Harpagus thus proved instrumental in the Persian victory over the Lydians and, one should think, many battles against the Medes, just as Croesus' advice helped define the strategy for the suppression of Pactyes' uprising.

Cyrus' tolerance of different viewpoints and ability to objectively balance the positive and negative consequences of his potential actions bespeak a considerable attention to detail, and it is obvious that the Persian conqueror laid the groundwork for his wars as far in advance as possible. Thus, before revolting against the Medes, Cyrus spent five years consolidating his position in southern Iran by annexing tribes that could supply him with men and horses enough to withstand Astyages' numerous troops. In a similar vein, his invasion of Babylonia was preceded by the cessation of horse and iron exports to that country, and his unsuccessful effort to raise the Ionians in revolt against Croesus may have represented a failed, yet worthwhile, attempt to deprive the Lydians of their hoplite infantry. Cyrus searched for and found collaborators within the enemy camp in each of his wars against the Medes, Lydians, and Babylonians. According to Sidney Smith, Cyrus' military success was "due as much to this faculty as to the speedy movement of his armies," and it has been said that a favorable oracle was worth more to Cyrus than a victory in the field.¹⁰⁵

Yet, for all the preparation that went into his campaigns, Cyrus, unlike some of his successors, possessed an uncanny ability to adapt to unexpected conditions, and more than any of his opponents, he acted boldly and decisively when circumstance required it. Evidence of these attributes rests in his use of camel riders as an unorthodox means of neutralizing the vaunted Lydian cavalry, as well as his shocking decision to dash straight for Sardis after the Battle of Pteria. The Assyriologist Max Mallowan has noted that, “although the account which Xenophon has left us of Cyrus’ campaigns . . . is not strictly historical, it gives us an insight into both the Achaemenians’ military mind and diplomatic practices: Cyrus II, the model prince, may have initiated many of these.”¹⁰⁶ Special attention, therefore, is due to the various episodes in the *Cyropaedia*, in which Cyrus advocates a Napoleonic thrust into the heart of enemy territory. Such offensives not only tested the mettle of his men but presumably found reflection in equally aggressive tactics on the battlefield, where Cyrus reportedly had a penchant for ruse, even if it meant using some of his soldiers as bait.¹⁰⁷

To wage war in this bold and audacious manner, Cyrus needed the absolute loyalty and complete devotion of his soldiers. The sources agree that Cyrus, like Alexander and Caesar, maintained a deep connection with his men.¹⁰⁸ In the *Cyropaedia*, much of the dialogue between Cyrus and his commanders occurs in the context of dinners or symposia in the royal tent. Here, surrounded only by his confidants, Cyrus seems to have let his guard down, so much so that his officers could even poke fun at the awkward

manner in which he performed the ritual war dance.¹⁰⁹ Skeptics might doubt an absolute monarch's tolerance for such ribbing; but heroic traditions ran deep in Persian culture, and Persian commanders kept the necessary wartime comradery through informal interactions at nightly drinking bouts, hence the Persian phrase *razm-o bazm*, "battling and boozing."

Outside the tent, Cyrus was a strict disciplinarian, who prided himself on leading an army of extremely focused individuals. According to Xenophon, he once invited a Saka to the field where his troops were training and told him to shut his eyes and throw a clod of dirt in the air, confident that wherever it landed it would hit an outstanding soldier.¹¹⁰ The Saka obeyed and, as chance would have it, struck one of Cyrus' cavalry commanders in the face. To the Saka's amazement, the cavalry commander did not flinch, but continued on his rounds, even though "his face was covered with blood and dirt."¹¹¹

Cyrus had no tolerance for deserters, whom he executed, and was ready to put swords to the backs of his own men during battle, if he saw them giving ground needlessly.¹¹² He was particularly unforgiving of soldiers who disobeyed his orders. Throughout history, many an army has suffered defeat when, after a preliminary victory, its members turned to looting, and like most generals, Cyrus viewed the distribution of booty among the soldiery as a means of rewarding meritorious conduct – hence, his ire at those who filled their pockets without his permission.¹¹³ There was yet another reason why Cyrus wished to regulate his soldiers' accumulation of plunder: the Persians were a recently unified people, and Cyrus' army included men from families that had recently

harbored royal aspirations. Cyrus was, therefore, perennially concerned that another Persian nobleman might accrue wealth enough to set himself up as a royal rival. He accordingly posted inspectors at the gates of the cities he conquered to ensure that none of his men exited with an inordinate amount of booty.¹¹⁴ The *Cyropaedia* makes clear that Cyrus desired exceptional wealth so that he alone could bestow favors upon the members of his army. “By enriching my men and doing them kindnesses,” Xenophon has Cyrus say, “I win with my superfluous wealth their friendship and loyalty, and from that I reap as my reward security and good fame.”¹¹⁵ Knowledge that they would receive compensation for their service must have played a significant role in checking the violent impulses of his soldiers – an outcome in which the conqueror took great pride.¹¹⁶

There is unfortunately not enough information to further discern Cyrus’ proper place in military history. However, he certainly understood how to bring various peoples together, lead them into battle, emerge victorious, and reward his men appropriately. These were the hallmarks of an excellent leader.

****** Most modern reconstructions place Herodotus in Athens between 447 BCE and 443 BCE. At that time, Athens was still reeling from the shock of a failed military campaign against the Persians in Egypt. As for Xenophon, he endured the humiliating Peace of Antalcidas, also known as the “King’s Peace,” through which the Persian king Artaxerxes II became the ultimate arbiter of disputes between the mainland Greeks.

† See Appendix XIII.

‡ The term “heavy infantry” is used here in a relative sense to describe those Persian foot soldiers who, due to their armor and spears, could serve as shock infantry. The intention is not to imply that these troops were as heavily armed as Greek hoplites or even Assyrian heavy infantrymen, who wore metal helmets and lamellar armor, and who carried either long, wooden shields or large, circular ones faced with

bronze.

§ See page 269.

¶ Most eastern Iranians, including the Sakas, could communicate with the Medes and Persians without interpreters, and many Elamites, especially in eastern Khuzestan and the highlands of Anshan, seem to have understood Old Persian. These factors presumably encouraged Cyrus to give the eastern Iranians and Elamites an important role within his army.

*** The rulers of the Saka and Arab tribes from which the Persians recruited mercenaries were unconquered allies or clients of the Persian Empire. The Persepolis reliefs depict Saka and Arab emissaries carrying arms in the presence of the king – a right denied the representatives of lands under direct imperial control.

† The key to hoplite warfare was the steady advance of the phalanx in close formation. For this reason, as well as on account of their heavy armor, hoplite forces tended to advance slowly and could not freely change fronts. Phalanxes were thus extremely vulnerable to flanking maneuvers, especially along the right side of the battle line. This was because hoplites carried their shields in their left hands, thus leaving their right sides entirely exposed. This deficiency in hoplite warfare came to the fore at the Battle of Cunaxa, when Cyrus the Younger's Greek hoplites, who were stationed just to the left of the Euphrates River, refused to provide critical assistance to their leader at the center of the battlefield for fear of exposing the right flank of their phalanx.

‡ Consider, for example, Herodotus' (9.70) astonishing claim that the Greeks butchered 297,000 Persian soldiers at the Battle of Plataea, and Arrian's statement (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 2.12) that, at Issus, something like 100,000 Persians perished, such that Darius III could cross a ravine on the bodies of his fallen soldiers.

§ For example, Darius I and Xerxes I constructed pontoon bridges across the Bosphorus and Hellespont, respectively, for the conveyance of their armies into Europe, and Xerxes dug a canal, which is still visible today, across the Mount Athos peninsula to protect his fleet from dangerous storms. During the reign of Artaxerxes I, the Persians even diverted a branch of the Nile River to strand an Athenian flotilla of 200 triremes.

Cyrus the Father: The Glory Days of Cyrus, King of Persia

The Persians have a saying that Darius was a tradesman, Cambyses a tyrant, and Cyrus a father – the first being out for profit wherever he could get it, the second harsh and careless of his subjects' interests, and the third, Cyrus, in the kindness of his heart, always occupied with plans for their well-being.

—Herodotus

The court over which Cyrus presided during the last decade of his reign was very different from that which he had inherited from his father. The same Persian nobles previously renowned for their rugged attire now appeared before Cyrus dressed in magnificent garments made of the best fabric.¹ Their appearance may be deduced from the bas-reliefs at Persepolis, Susa, and Naqsh-e Rostam, which depict three groups of Persian aristocrats. All wear the long Elamite robe, which had served as the standard ceremonial costume of the Persians since their occupation of Fars in the seventh century BCE. Those

in one group don tall fluted crowns, made of felt and sometimes covered in gold leaf, while the members of the other two wear low-rising hats and fillets, respectively.² All are heavily bejeweled with earrings, bracelets, and necklaces of gold or silver inlaid with precious stones. Equally extravagant were the Medes, who maintained a strong presence at Cyrus' court. The reliefs show their nobles garbed in the tight-fitting tunic and ankle-length pants of the steppe nomads. The highest-ranking members of the Median aristocracy wear long, fur-lined coats draped over their shoulders and domed felt caps with a single ribbon dangling from the back; those of lower rank sport triple-peaked hoods that droop slightly to the front. As the representatives of the empire's two pre-eminent nations and descendants of a proud warrior class, Median and Persian nobles received the special privilege of bearing arms in the presence of the king. The Persians tucked small daggers into the sashes of their robes, while the Medes carried *akinakes* short swords and elaborate bow-cases slung below their waists. Thus attired, the leading men of Persia and Media entered the royal pavilion to greet the king. The ushers who led them into the royal presence carried slender golden staffs, for which reason the Greeks called them "mace-bearers."

But the royal court was not just a haven for noble Medes and Persians. Representatives from all the empire's subject nations, as well as some from nearby countries, were present in varying numbers, if for no other reason than to discern and possibly influence Cyrus' policies with respect to their homelands. Their presence gave the court an exotic appearance and made it a true microcosm of the multi-ethnic

Achaemenid Empire. Prophets, entertainers, athletes, and others whose presence added to the court's glamor rounded out the king's entourage.³ In this, as in other practices, a conscious effort to continue the royal traditions of the Assyrians may be discerned.

According to Athenaeus, the Persian king regularly dined fifteen thousand guests at his "table."⁴ This anecdote should not be taken literally as proof of sprawling nightly banquets, for no known building of the Achaemenid period could have housed so large a crowd. Rather, the reference pertains to the number of individuals, including soldiers and servants, who traveled with the king and received their wages in kind from the royal treasury. Thus, Heracleides of Cyne, a Greek historian of the fourth century BCE, provides that the quartermasters divided most of the food prepared for the royal entourage among the guards in the courtyard.⁵ The actual number of guests who feasted in the king's palace must have varied based on the monarch's desire for privacy. However, the Book of Nehemiah states that 150 men ate in the company of the district governor of Judah each night, and we may surmise that a similar number dined with the king on a regular basis.⁶ Whenever the king held a banquet, the royal women and wives of the nobles ate separately at a feast hosted by the king's chief wife; they only joined their husbands for drinks after the meal.⁷ What sorts of dishes were served at the royal table? The sources provide that hundreds of animals were slaughtered daily for the royal court, including horses, camels, oxen, asses, deer, and birds.⁸ These were magnificently garnished and served with an assortment of side dishes, such as bread, pastries, fruits, and nuts. Because a high premium was placed

upon the creation of novel dishes, the royal chefs were always searching for new recipes.⁹ Like the waiters who served the royal family and its guests, members of the kitchen staff were required to bathe each day and dress in white outfits.



Achaemenid silver bowl with floral design.

Wine was served in large quantities at the king's table. Herodotus states that the Persians were quite fond of alcohol.¹⁰ This should not surprise us, given the old Aryan penchant for drinking bouts. Further regarding the Persians' love for alcohol, Herodotus mentions a custom whereby the Persians reconsidered all important decisions made when drunk during a state of sobriety; and similarly, they contemplated all important decisions made when sober while inebriated.¹¹ Strabo offers a more sensible rationalization of this custom when he states that the Persians were prone to discuss serious matters while drinking wine.¹² Several Greek authors mention the ornate metalwares used to serve wine at the king's

table, and archaeologists have discovered many beautiful examples of gold and silver drinking bowls and animal-shaped rhytons throughout the former territories of the Persian Empire. According to Athenaeus, only those disfavored by the king drank from wooden or ceramic cups at the royal table.¹³

Although his nobles were permitted to drink as much as they pleased, custom forbade the king from being inebriated in front of his courtiers, except during the fall equinox, when he danced the so-called “Persian Dance” while intoxicated.¹⁴ This was an ancient war dance that required the performer to carry two shields, which he clanged together as he crouched and leapt into the air to the tune of a flute.¹⁵ The dance must have involved flamboyant gesticulations, for, as Xenophon heard, Cyrus, who was prudish by even Persian standards, performed it awkwardly.¹⁶

Royal banquets and symposia were often accompanied by entertainment, and the sources mention performances by dancing girls, musicians, and bards who specialized in the singing of epic tales. The insistence upon such entertainment sadly became endemic during the empire’s final days, such that it persisted even during moments of crisis. Thus, following his victory at Issus, Alexander captured the 329 female musicians whom Darius III had brought along for entertainment during the march.¹⁷ This evidence points to the institutionalization of court habits concerning dining and banqueting, a development that several later authors ascribe to Cyrus. Most notably, Polyaeus states that Cyrus established the dinner menu of the Persian court by ordering the inscription upon a bronze pillar of the

various ingredients used to prepare its meals.¹⁸ Although the existence of such an inscription is dubious, it is entirely believable that Cyrus would have consciously maintained a luxurious table as part of his efforts to elevate the status of the king. After all, the ancient Near Easterners believed that a master must share his meals and offer sustenance to those under his protection, such that a monarch's failure to host magnificent feasts impugned his right to rule.¹⁹

Ideological considerations further attached to the sport of hunting, the favorite pastime of kings and nobles throughout the ancient world. The Iranian obsession with the chase resulted in the introduction of the Old Persian terms for hunting – **shkara* and **nakhuschara* – into Aramaic, Armenian, Indian, and other languages spoken within the Achaemenid Empire.²⁰ According to Xenophon, Cyrus lauded hunting as a form of military exercise, for it called upon the same skills necessary for success in war.²¹ But there was more to the sport than that. Since the age of the god-kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia, Near Eastern royal ideology required the monarch to possess superlative physical skills, such as strength, endurance, and speed. This notion, coupled with the common observation that many beasts, particularly predators, “are faster, stronger, quicker, and larger than the best human specimens,” made the hunt the ideal stage on which to showcase the king's physical qualifications as a ruler.²² Persian kings and their nobles hunted in the wild as well as in private parks. Extensive preparations were necessary whenever hunts took place in the latter setting. Special officers selected the animals to be pursued, let them out of their cages, and released the hunting dogs to flush

them out into the open.²³ In addition, a sizable escort, consisting of musicians, attendants, and guards, accompanied the hunting party into the park.

Hunting expeditions in the wilderness were an altogether different affair. The emphasis there was on braving the elements and defeating the animal in its own environment. It was not unheard of for a prince or noble to lose his life during such hunts, which often assumed Melvillian airs and lasted for days.²⁴ Hunting parties operating in the wild typically covered a wide distance and used relays of horsemen to bring down particularly speedy prey, such as deer and wild asses.²⁵

We have already recounted the *Cyropaedia*'s anecdotes about Cyrus' early hunting feats. These tales underscore the Persians' high opinion of Cyrus, for, as the legendary history makes clear, prowess at hunting represented the true mark of a hero. The special game reserved for the king was the lion, the most ferocious of beasts. This tradition predated the Persians by many centuries. Assyrian art is replete with images of royal lion hunts, and in their inscriptions, Assyrian kings emphasize their skill in this "lordly sport."²⁶ Hunting lions symbolized the monarch's supremacy over the wild forces of nature. For this reason, upstaging the king during a lion hunt was tantamount to treason.[¶]

Falconry represented another royal sport in which Cyrus likely engaged. No Greek author mentions this sport in connection with the Persians, and no pertinent artistic depictions from the Achaemenid era have survived. However, the Assyrians and Egyptians were proud falconers, and a Babylonian text from the Achaemenid period reports the existence of special officers who managed the "king's birds."²⁷ Like lion-

hunting, falconry presumably served an important ideological purpose, insofar as it connoted the king's mastery over birds of prey, the presence of which was believed to signify that of the *Farnah*, or Royal Glory.

Aside from hunting and falconry, high-born Persians regularly attended dog races and partook in riding, wood-carving, archery, and spear-throwing for leisure.²⁸ The timelessness of these pastimes, and their characterization as activities fit for nobles and kings, is evident from an inscription of Ashurbanipal that describes how that monarch enjoyed himself: "This is what was done all of my days: I mounted my steed, I rode joyfully, I went up to the hunting lodge, I held the bow, I let fly the arrow, the sign of my valor. I hurled heavy lances like a javelin. Holding the reins like a driver, I made the wheels go round . . . I wished to be the great lord of all the craftsmen."²⁹



Relief from the stairway of the Apadana at Persepolis showing Elamite tribute-bearers leading a lioness and her two cubs. The lioness turns its head to snarl at the delegates holding its cubs, thus adding an element of realism and drama to the scene. Based on what remains today, the lioness represents the only female depicted at Persepolis. Note that the Elamites are not shown bringing a male lion as a gift for the king. This is because Persian royal ideology deemed it appropriate

that only the king should be depicted subduing male lions.

The Persians' ability to indulge in such activities stemmed from their status as empire masters, and according to Herodotus, recognition of this fact motivated them to call Cyrus their "Father," for the mighty conqueror had provided them with all sorts of amenities.³⁰ It is possible that certain Persians took to the luxuries afforded them by their newfound wealth too eagerly for Cyrus' liking. As previously mentioned, Herodotus relates that certain nobles approached the conqueror toward the end of his reign to propose that the Persian nation be allowed to immigrate *en masse* to one of the empire's more fertile provinces, for Parsa was too rough a country for them.** Cyrus rejected the proposal immediately, noting that comfortable living would inevitably sap the military prowess of the empire's ruling race. He himself had future conquests in mind and insisted that the Persians keep their fighting mettle up to par.

Cyrus and the Persian Nobility

Cyrus' ability to provide for the noble families of Persia and Media, together with his willingness to treat their members as respected guests, tablemates, and hunting companions, helped secure their support for his monarchical reforms. Indeed, the prospect of receiving royal presents, bureaucratic appointments, and honorary titles, such as "King's Friend," "King's Tablemate," and "Royal Benefactor," persuaded the Iranian nobles to align their interests with those of the

king.³¹ Among the agricultural tribes, proximity to the king soon superseded clan affiliations as the chief marker of social status within the Achaemenid Empire and as the only real guarantee of inclusion within the ranks of the *orosangae* (Old Persian **varu-sangha*), or “those whose fame is widespread.”³² Herodotus gives this term as the Persian title of the Royal Benefactors, but it probably served as a general designation for the entire high nobility.³³

These nobles certainly benefited from the initiation of an important development program that was of special interest to all Persians. The archaeological record indicates that before the imperial period significant urbanization did not occur within the Marv Dasht, where Darius I founded the famous palace complex of Persepolis.³⁴ This appears to have been the case, even though the Marv Dasht was one of the best agricultural areas in all Fars and the leading Persian tribes had turned to farming within a generation or two of migrating to the region, no later than the early seventh century BCE. However, textual sources indicate that Cyrus II and Cambyses II initiated the development of a vast 200-hectare area in the Marv Dasht that should probably be identified with the city of Huvadaichaya, which figures prominently in the Bisutun Inscription and Persepolis Fortification Tablets³⁵ Most scholars now agree that Darius built Persepolis as the citadel for Huvadaichaya, where many nobles and officers of the court maintained residences.³⁶ Although Huvadaichaya never evolved into an urban center on par with Babylon or Susa, its expansion, which probably commenced under Cyrus, marked the revitalization of an important region that had fallen

into desolation since the late second millennium BCE.³⁷

Contemporaneously with the initial phases of construction at Huvadaichaya, large-scale agricultural and urban development occurred in other parts of Fars. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets appear to attest the construction by Cyrus and Cambyses of secondary royal residences at Gabae (Old Persian **Gaba*) along the northern frontier of Fars, not far from modern Esfahan, as well as at Neyriz in the southeastern portion of the province.³⁸ The idea seems to have been to incorporate these regions into the royal economy and to place them under direct imperial oversight so as to ensure the necessary investment of energy and resources for their development.³⁹ The evidence from southeastern Fars is particularly interesting. Archaeologists have discovered the ruins of a modest Achaemenid settlement in the Darab valley, and preliminary investigations at Tal-e Zahhak in the Fasa plain have yielded traces of a vast, fortified terrace, surrounded by a rectangular moat.⁴⁰ Harold Bailey has derived the name “Fasa” from Old Persian **Pasaya*, meaning “campground.”⁴¹ The implication is that the buildings at Tal-e Zahhak, like those at Pasargadae, were constructed at or near a former nomadic encampment.⁴² The archaeological evidence thus suggests that Cyrus actively encouraged the development of permanent agricultural settlements in the Persian heartland, especially in areas with excellent farming potential that were previously subject to nomadic occupation or that were underpopulated. This accords with the Persians’ memory of Cyrus as a giving king, constantly concerned for their welfare.

Cyrus clearly did much to enhance the prestige of the Persian nobility and to transform that body from a tribal aristocracy into a powerful gentry, well poised to run a universal empire. Yet, despite his largesse, Cyrus' sudden rise to power must have had the negative consequence of convincing some high-born Persians that thrones could be won with relative ease. In this connection, Herodotus portrays Cyrus as ever fearful that avaricious Median or Persian nobles might try to topple him.⁴³ Cyrus' paranoia would seem to have been justified based on the events that took place after Cambyses' death in 522 BCE, when several Iranian aristocrats made a bid for the throne.

Chief among those who raised Cyrus' ire was a certain Vindafarnah, son of Vayaspāra. Herodotus transmits his name as Intaphrenes, and Xenophon and Hellanicus render it as Daiphernes and Daphernes, respectively. Vindafarnah became famous as one of the seven conspirators, including Darius, who defeated Gaumata the Magian in 522 BCE. As Muhammad Dandamaev has observed, the seven conspirators launched their coup with the main aim of restoring the traditional rights of the Persian tribal aristocracy. These rights had been curtailed by Cyrus' monarchical reforms, as well as by Cambyses, who was particularly dedicated to strengthening the crown vis-à-vis the aristocracy. That Vindafarnah sought to establish his independence already in Cyrus' day is evident from an anecdote in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.⁴⁴ According to Xenophon, Cyrus often received petitions during royal processions and beckoned those of his nobles "whom he wished to have most courted by the people" to screen the petitions so that only worthy cases reached the king. Unlike the other nobles, who heeded Cyrus'

summons swiftly, Vindafarnah “thought that he would show more independence if he did not obey at once.”⁴⁵ Cyrus took offense and dismissed Vindafarnah from his entourage, choosing instead to promote those nobles who executed his commands more zealously.

This is Xenophon’s simplistic account of the fallout between Vindafarnah and Cyrus. To appreciate the true nature of their relationship, however, one must consider the story’s likely historical context. Vindafarnah was almost certainly descended from a long line of Persian tribal chieftains, who had previously ruled over some part of Parsa.⁴⁶ His ancestors were thus no different than Cyrus’ own, such that Vindafarnah was loathe to subject himself to another Persian prince, no matter how great the latter’s achievements. The tale of Vindafarnah’s recalcitrance immediately follows Xenophon’s account of the occasion on which the Persian nobles first prostrated before Cyrus.⁴⁷ According to Xenophon, Cyrus coerced the nobles into performing this act of homage by means of a clever ploy (see page 256), which must have left certain high-ranking aristocrats dismayed. An interesting parallel thus emerges between Vindafarnah’s behavior and that of Callisthenes, the court historian of Alexander the Great who became famous as the spokesman of all Greeks and Macedonians outraged by Alexander’s insistence that *proskynesis*, or ritual obeisance, be performed in the royal presence. However, whereas Alexander executed Callisthenes for his obstinance, Cyrus allowed Vindafarnah to live. Such mercy was not without risk. That Vindafarnah had authority and influence enough to create serious trouble for whoever occupied the Persian throne is evident from his actions

during the early years of Darius' reign, when, with the support of his family, Vindafarnah attempted to overthrow the Achaemenid dynasty.⁴⁸ The plot failed and ultimately cost Vindafarnah and his followers their lives. Nevertheless, his ability to vie for the crown in the first place speaks volumes about his power and the delicate handling needed to keep him in line.

Another important noble was Otanes the son of Pharnaspes (whom the Bisutun Inscription calls Thukhra, or the "Red"), a fellow Achaemenid and among the wealthiest members of the Persian nobility.⁴⁹ Herodotus and Justin portray Otanes as the prime instigator in the plot against Gaumata, and Herodotus provides that Darius accorded Otanes and his descendants special privileges consisting of formal autonomy from royal rule and a yearly allotment of fine Median coats and other kingly gifts.⁵⁰ Some scholars have surmised that Cyrus had granted Otanes' family similar rights, upon which Cambyses later infringed.⁵¹ This is conceivable, given that Pharnaspes had sired Cyrus' wife, Cassandane, and likely played an instrumental role in rallying the Persian tribes during the buildup to the war against Astyages. Had Pharnaspes acted as a powerbroker on that occasion, he might have deemed himself worthy of special treatment, which Cyrus, who was quick to repay debts, may have granted. It was to bind the influential family of Pharnaspes more closely to his own that Cyrus arranged for his son, Cambyses, to marry Otanes' daughter, Phaidime.⁵² This union aimed to ensure that the next two generations of Achaemenid kings would be descendants of Pharnaspes, thus giving Pharnaspes' family a stake in the monarchy.

It was perhaps with equal parts trust and caution that Cyrus dealt with the Achaemenid ancestors of Darius I. Darius' grandfather Arsames had recognized Cyrus' rule early on, and the Bisutun Inscription provides that Hystaspes, Darius' father, held an important office, perhaps that of satrap, in Parthia and Hyrcania in 522–521 BCE. Scholars often assume that Hystaspes received his appointment from Cyrus, but the sources do not say so. According to Herodotus, Hystaspes was governor of Persia under Cambyses, and he protected Cyrus' interests in the homeland while the latter marched against the Massagetae in 530 BCE.[†] Cyrus obviously had faith in Hystaspes, and several scholars have surmised that he entrusted the governorship of Persia to him pursuant to an age-old arrangement between the two main branches of the Achaemenid family.⁵³ Although such theories are speculative, we may be confident that Hystaspes was, at minimum, an important officer in Cyrus' army.

Hystaspes' excellent reputation seems to have facilitated the political career of his eldest son, Darius.⁵⁴ According to the Roman author Aelian, Darius already served as Royal Bow-Bearer by the end of Cyrus' reign.⁵⁵ This testimony contradicts Herodotus' statement that Darius was only twenty years old and still a soldier-in-training when Cyrus embarked upon his fateful last campaign.⁵⁶ No good reason exists to prefer one story to the other, but we should not doubt that Cyrus, through contact with Hystaspes, recognized Darius' greatness early on.⁵⁷

The House of Cyrus

To preside over a large family was a prerogative of those with aristocratic status in ancient Persia. Herodotus provides that the king annually dispensed presents to those of his subjects who had the most sons, and in his Bisutun Inscription, Darius lays the following curse upon anyone who might vandalize his monument: “May Ahuramazda be an enemy unto thee, and may your family not grow!”⁵⁸

The Persians practiced polygamy, and Cyrus had several wives. The first and foremost was Cassandane, the daughter of Pharnaspes the Red, whose allegiance Cyrus had secured by marrying this princess. According to Herodotus, Cyrus loved Cassandane deeply and ordered all his subjects to mourn for her when she died. As Cyrus’ principal queen, Cassandane bore the titles “King’s Wife” and “Lady of the House” (Old Persian **manapathni*, Middle Persian *banbishn*).⁵⁹ Herodotus states that Cassandane gave birth to Cambyses, Cyrus’ eldest son and eventual heir, whereas Ctesias ignores Cassandane altogether and maintains that Cambyses was born to Cyrus and Amytis, the Median princess whom Cyrus married after capturing Ecbatana. Herodotus’ accurate knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Cassandane’s death, mention of which seems to appear in the Babylonian Chronicle, suggests that he knew better.⁶⁰ However, Ctesias was probably not mistaken about Cyrus’ marriage to Amytis. Most scholars accept this union as historical, and its existence may be demonstrated by the special status accorded to the princess Atossa (see page 379).⁶¹

Although she was not Cyrus’ favorite wife, Amytis

was a very powerful woman in her own right. Ctesias in all likelihood tells the truth when he insists that Cyrus' marriage to this princess enabled him to assert his rule over the Medes and their many former allies and subjects. Their marriage was probably strictly political.[‡] Yet, Amytis must have exercised a greater influence over the conqueror than any of his other wives. The Median imperial legacy was extremely important to Cyrus, and Amytis was the legitimate heiress to Astyages' estate. According to Ctesias, Amytis used her influence to pursue personal vendettas against her enemies at court, often with fatal results; but scholars have dismissed these tales.[§] One suspects that the author of the *Persica* fabricated the stories of Amytis' vengefulness to advance popular Greek stereotypes about Persian women and harem politics.

Amytis may not have been Cyrus' only Median bride. According to the fifth century CE Greek chronicler John Malalas, Cyrus married a second Median princess called Bardane, whose name does not appear in the other sources.⁶² Malalas states that Bardane had previously been married to the fictitious Darius the Mede, Cyrus' royal predecessor in the Book of Daniel. Assuming this testimony to be reliable, Darius the Mede must here represent Spitamas rather than Astyages, for it is unlikely that Cyrus would have married his grandfather's wife. Amytis, too, had previously been married to Spitamas, whom Cyrus executed after capturing Ecbatana. So we may have evidence of the Persian conqueror taking over the harem of a vanquished rival. Such treatment of Spitamas' wives would accord with Herodotus' stories about the practices of later Persian kings.⁶³ But the

historicity of these tales is unclear, and Malalas himself is hardly a reliable source.⁶⁴



Line drawing of a seal impression showing an Achaemenid queen or queen mother receiving the gift of a dove from a young princess. Another royal lady stands behind an incense burner.

Similarly dubious is Herodotus' account of the alleged marriage between Cyrus and the beautiful Egyptian princess Nitetis.⁶⁵ According to Herodotus, Nitetis was the daughter of the late pharaoh Apries, whom Amasis II, the reigning pharaoh since 570 BCE, had deposed and murdered. The story goes that Cyrus had asked Amasis for the hand of his daughter, but fearing that Cyrus intended to use the girl as a hostage, Amasis sent him Apries' daughter, instead. Herodotus reports that Cyrus favored Nitetis, much to the jealousy of Cassandane, who once complained to a friend: "In spite of my beautiful children Cyrus treats me with contempt and gives all his attention to that woman he got from Egypt."⁶⁶ According to one of Herodotus' sources, this remark caused the ten-year-old Cambyses to vow to turn Egypt "upside-down."

Nevertheless, the very existence of Cyrus' Egyptian bride is doubtful. An alternate story holds that Cambyses was the Persian king whom Amasis duped, while another makes Nitetis Cambyses' mother. Herodotus found all these tales unconvincing, remarking that the Egyptians fabricated them to claim kinship with Cyrus after Cambyses had conquered their country.⁶⁷ Still, the story of Nitetis reinforces the notion that Cyrus, like his Median predecessors, used marriage to achieve political ends.⁶⁸

The sources fail to name any of Cyrus' other wives, and it is possible that none existed, for the conqueror seems to have had relatively few children. We know of only two sons (Cambyses and Bardiya) and three or four daughters (Atossa, Artystone, Roxana, and, perhaps, Meroe).¶ This apparent lack of offspring may be explained by the high infant mortality rate that existed in those days.** Alternatively, one might think that Cyrus sired other children (by other wives), who perished during the tumultuous events of 522–521 BCE, when various usurpers, some claiming to be Bardiya, had a clear motive for killing the conqueror's progeny, or that these other children escaped notice because they were born to “low-ranking” women and, therefore, deemed “illegitimate” for dynastic purposes. However, the deaths of Cambyses and Bardiya created a power vacuum, and one should expect Cyrus' other sons, assuming any existed, to have factored into the events of 522–521 BCE as potential claimants to the throne, even if they were “illegitimate.” That no such son stepped forward strongly suggests that Cyrus fathered only five or six children, from less than a handful of women.⁶⁹

This image of Cyrus accords with that which Xenophon presents in the *Cyropaedia*. As Xenophon knew from personal experience, Persian kings on campaign often delighted in the company of concubines, and a custom seems to have existed whereby the army's captains honored the king by presenting him with the most beautiful women they captured. According to Xenophon, this was the manner in which Cyrus met Panthea, the queen of Susa and most beautiful woman in all Asia.⁷⁰ Xenophon relates how the Persians took Panthea captive during a raid upon the Babylonian camp. After beholding her striking features, Cyrus' officers separated Panthea from the other female captives and forbade anyone from touching her. They then took her to Cyrus, who, rather than sleep with her, entrusted her to the Mede Araspes, one of his most loyal officers, with strict orders to honor her dignity until she could be restored to her lawful husband, Abradates, the Susian king.[†] Elsewhere in the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon relates that the Babylonian traitor Gobryas offered Cyrus his daughter in marriage but that the Persian conqueror arranged for her to wed Hystaspes, instead. Xenophon uses the tales of Panthea and Gobryas' daughter to underscore Cyrus' self-restraint, an attribute Xenophon deemed commendable for any military or political leader.⁷¹

How did Cyrus' wives live? Plutarch's testimony that Persian women "spend their lives shut up within doors" holds true only for the late Achaemenid period, when emperors such as Artaxerxes II maintained 360 wives and concubines in their harems.⁷² The vast majority of these women served only to entertain or pleasure the king and were, therefore, treated as

chattel (some were actually purchased from slave markets). This was not the case in the early Achaemenid period. All of Cyrus' wives hailed from aristocratic families and must have enjoyed the same rights and privileges as the royal women named in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. These texts show female members of the royal household owning estates, presiding over construction projects, traveling independently of their husbands, and organizing lavish feasts for their friends and relatives. Josef Wiesehofer has suspected that such activity on the part of the royal ladies shocked the Greeks, who believed in the "ideal of a (married) woman leading a secluded, irreproachable life," and inspired greatly embellished stories of harem intrigue, which portrayed Persian women as both "attractive and dangerous."⁷³

Given the circumstances, Cyrus could hardly have relied upon eunuchs to the extent claimed by Xenophon. According to Xenophon, Cyrus used eunuchs as palace attendants, because he believed that they were especially devoted to their masters and could be trusted to protect the king and his family in private settings, where they were most vulnerable to violence.⁷⁴ These traits evolved from the inability of eunuchs to beget children, as well as from the harsh treatment typically accorded them by ordinary men. Consequently, Cyrus "selected eunuchs for every post of personal service to him, from the doorkeepers up," or so Xenophon would have us believe.⁷⁵ Lost in Xenophon's discussion is the obvious fact that eunuchs served mainly to look after the harem. As geldings, they were less prone to engage in illicit affairs with their master's women, and even if they did, their

infertility obviated the risk of a bastard being passed off as the king's child. Due to the limited size of his harem, Cyrus had little need for eunuchs, and the prominent role they played in the courts of future Achaemenid kings (a development that Cyrus himself would probably have lamented) must be attributed to the increased importance of harem politics during the late Achaemenid period.

Cyrus thus was not bothered by harem intrigue to the same degree as his successors. However, his family was not free of strife. A constant source of concern for the conqueror must have been the simmering feud between his sons. Cambyses was by all accounts Cyrus' firstborn. "Born of the same father and same mother as Cambyses," according to the Bisutun Inscription and the classical authors, was Bardiya, the "Exalted One," whose name appears as Smerdis, Mardos, or Mergis in the classical sources.⁷⁶ Cambyses had a bad reputation in antiquity, perhaps undeservedly so. Herodotus describes him as a heavy drinker and bloodthirsty tyrant, prone to irrational acts of violence even when sober.⁷⁷ However, the Near Eastern evidence makes clear that Herodotus' portrayal of Cambyses is greatly embellished.⁷⁸ According to Dandamaev, Herodotus obtained most of his information about Cambyses from two groups that despised Cyrus' eldest son due to the policies he adopted as king.⁷⁹ The first group was the Persian tribal aristocracy, the powers of which Cambyses limited in order to strengthen the monarchy. The second group was the Egyptian priesthood, which resented him for reducing the enormous revenues received by the country's temples. Dandamaev maintains that both groups slandered Cambyses by

spreading false tales that portrayed him as a madman. That Cambyses was, in fact, a skilled general is apparent from his seamless invasion of Egypt in 525 BCE, and the respect he showed for native Egyptian customs after conquering the country demonstrates his receptivity to political training at Cyrus' hands.

Still, we cannot rehabilitate Cambyses' character completely. Although he was hardly the lunatic described by Herodotus, his reputation as a callous taskmaster was not completely unfounded. We have already seen how Cyrus abruptly removed Cambyses from office as "King of Babylon" in 538 BCE. The precise circumstances of his removal are unknown, but it was presumably in response to some mismanagement on the prince's part.[‡] The disturbances that rocked the Persian Empire after Cambyses' death further indicate that he did not always trust the right people or make the right decisions. Hard-hearted and selfish, Cambyses was by no means the spitting image of his father, despite the occasional flashes of brilliance. Plato attributes Cambyses' character flaws to a poor upbringing by Cyrus, who was too preoccupied with conquest to play an active role in his son's life.⁸⁰ More recently, Ali Reza Shahbazi has proposed that Cambyses' inability to beget children, a fact mentioned by nearly all the classical authors, negatively affected his personality.⁸¹ These oversimplified explanations seem too didactic to be taken seriously, but all signs point to Bardiya enjoying greater popularity than Cambyses.[§]

An interesting indication of Bardiya's enormous popularity involves the Iranians' use of heroic epithets in reference to him. Ctesias heard that Cyrus' younger son was called Tanyoxarces, which reflects Old Iranian

Tanu-vazraka*, or “Large-Bodied.”⁸² This epithet, which also occurs in Zoroastrian writings, must have been one of Bardiya’s nicknames. It connotes considerable physical strength and invincibility in combat, traits sure to impress the warlike Persians.[¶] Another potential nickname may lurk behind Xenophon’s reference to Bardiya as Tanoaxares.⁸³ Although most scholars view this name as a variant of **Tanu-vazraka*, some have characterized it as a separate term – rooted in Old Iranian **thanu* (“bow”) – meaning “He who pulls the bowstring.”⁸⁴ This proposed etymology recalls Herodotus’ report that Bardiya was the only member of the Persian army who could draw, even a little, the massive, tightly-strung bow that the Ethiopian king had sent to Cambyses.⁸⁵ According to Ernst Herzfeld, Herodotus’ tale contains the same motif as the legend of the Royal Scythians.⁸⁶ These nomads traced descent from a prince, who demonstrated his right to rule by bending a special bow, something his two older brothers could not do. The motif of the last-born son inheriting the kingship appears also in the Iranian legend of Feraydun (Avestan *Thraetona*), who made the youngest of his three sons the heir to the Persian throne. Bardiya’s advocates presumably drew upon these archaic myths in creating their own quasi-legendary account of the prince with the intent of legitimizing his claim to the succession.

The bow-pulling motif also occurs in the Iranian legend of Arash (Avestan *Erekhsha*, Old Persian **Arakhsha*), who reputedly fixed the boundary between Iran and Turan by climbing a mountain and firing an arrow several hundred miles to some natural landmark in Central Asia.⁸⁷ One might infer from the

selection of legends invoked to enhance Bardiya's reputation that Cyrus' junior son achieved victories over the steppe nomads in his capacity as viceroy of the Bactrians, Choramnians, Parthians, and Carmanians. According to Ctesias, Bardiya received this appointment while Cyrus was on his deathbed.⁸⁸ However, Xenophon had it on better authority that Bardiya became viceroy of Media and adjacent territories after Cyrus died, such that his eastern appointment presumably predated Cyrus' death.⁸⁹

So while Cambyses struggled to manage Babylon, the younger Bardiya flourished as his father's main representative in the strategically important provinces of "Upper Asia." Cambyses must have chafed whenever he heard the Persians praise Bardiya, who presumably seized every opportunity to one-up his brother. Bardiya's purpose was not just to aggravate Cambyses but also to secure the succession for himself. As scholars have noted, the Persians lacked settled rules of succession until the early decades of the fifth century BCE, and although a trend toward primogeniture had evolved during the generations preceding Cyrus, the rule had never been tested among the Achaemenid kings of Anshan.⁹⁰ Bardiya thus had reason to think that he could become crown prince by impressing his father. Whether Cyrus ever seriously considered promoting Bardiya over Cambyses is unknown but not unthinkable. Babylonian texts varying refer to Cambyses as "prince" or "crown prince" from 539 to 530 BCE. The same texts also show that Cambyses served as the honorary "King of Babylon" for two brief stints: first, for nine months in 538 BCE, after which Cyrus stripped him of the title, and again, for at least three

months, beginning in August 530 BCE, when Cyrus named him co-regent before marching against the Massagetae.⁹¹ The Babylonian evidence thus seems consistent with Herodotus' statement that Cambyses' position as heir apparent was only solidified during the final year of Cyrus' reign.



Achaemenid carved gem showing three kings with spears and quivers. According to some scholars, toward the end of his reign, Cyrus ruled his empire almost as a triarchy, with Cambyses as the titular king of Babylonia, Bardiya as the viceroy of the eastern provinces, and Cyrus himself presiding over all.

Given the circumstances, we may wish to consider what factors may have led Cyrus to designate Cambyses as his successor instead of Bardiya. The conqueror obviously saw great potential in Cambyses; otherwise, he would not have made him his heir apparent. According to Herzfeld, Cambyses gained Cyrus' trust while receiving important political and juridical training in Media, where he served as viceroy during his interregnum as "King of Babylon."⁹² This theory is tantalizing, especially in light of other

evidence suggesting that early Achaemenid crown princes traditionally lorded over Media and its surroundings.⁹³ But the Persepolis Fortification Tablets indicate that Cambyses and his immediate family were buried in Neyriz in southeastern Fars, so it is tempting to think that Cyrus tasked him with overseeing the development of this region, to which the prince developed a special attachment.⁹⁴ Cyrus presumably gave Cambyses the benefit of the doubt, because he personally favored the custom of primogeniture and wanted to set an important precedent for the future. Cyrus' personal experience may have been influential in this regard, as his own feud with Astyages must have taught him the value of a clear law of succession. We may even surmise that Cyrus preferred Cambyses for espousing theories of government that were more acceptable to Cyrus than those evinced by Bardiya. Here we should note that Cambyses' later efforts to centralize the Achaemenid monarchy represented a natural continuation of Cyrus' own policies, whereas Bardiya may have favored more egalitarian forms of rule.⁹⁵

Whatever his reasons, Cyrus ultimately devised a succession plan that would make Cambyses emperor in his stead and Bardiya second-in-command. The plan, which Cyrus did not definitively settle until the last months of his reign represented a doomed compromise. It required Cambyses to act more tactfully than he was perhaps capable of and Bardiya to follow his brother's leadership without question. Time would prove this arrangement unfair, and fatal, to both princes.

A far more glorious future was had by Cyrus' eldest daughter, Atossa.⁹⁶ This princess would achieve

great fame due to her intimate connection with four Achaemenid emperors. Not only was she born to Cyrus, but after his death, Atossa became the principal consort to Cambyses and then Darius, and the mother of Xerxes I. Herodotus even claims that Gaumata the Magian took her as wife after seizing the throne.⁹⁷ According to Herodotus, Cambyses flouted Persian law to marry Atossa upon becoming king in an unprecedented brother-sister marriage, and the circumstances of this union are vital to understanding Atossa's unique position within Cyrus' household.⁹⁸ Herodotus claims that Cambyses married Atossa out of love, but this statement commands little respect in light of alternative explanations that assign Cambyses a political motive. It is tempting to think that Cambyses operated under the influence of the Magi, who had a penchant for incestuous marriages.⁹⁹ Because the most common form of brother-sister marriage contracted by the Magi involved half-siblings, some scholars have concluded that Herodotus erred in making Atossa Cambyses' full-sister.¹⁰⁰ Assuming this theory to be correct, we may easily guess the identity of Atossa's mother. Amytis, daughter of Astyages, had been the heiress to the Median throne, and this right of inheritance would have passed to her offspring. As Amytis' eldest daughter, Atossa was thus the most august of Cyrus' children, and we may surmise that Cambyses married her in accordance with Magian custom, which had not yet become mainstream among the Persians, to solidify his position against other potential claimants to the Median throne.¹⁰¹

The princess Roxana was presumably also born to Cyrus and Amytis, for Cambyses married her, too,

after becoming king. Both Herodotus and Ctesias agree that Roxana died in Egypt, and their greatly embellished accounts suggest that she perished during childbirth.¹⁰² Roxana was probably the same person as Meroe, whom Strabo mentions as a sister-wife of Cambyses who passed away in Nubia.¹⁰³ The apparent confusion in names is explainable on the grounds that Greek “Meroe” could render the ancient form of New Persian *Mah-ruy*, “Having a face radiant like the moon.” This and equivalent designations for beautiful women occur frequently in classical Persian poetry and may have been used in antiquity in connection with Roxana.

Unlike her sisters, the princess Artystone was likely born to Cassandane, for neither Cambyses nor Gaumata sought to marry her. Herodotus states that Artystone was a virgin when she married Darius.¹⁰⁴ She was thus probably born around 540 BCE and the youngest of Cyrus’ children to survive to adulthood. Darius reputedly adored Artystone more than his other wives and had a magnificent statue of her made from solid gold.¹⁰⁵ Archaeologists have identified Artystone’s personal seal on several Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which mention her with the title **dukshish*, or “princess.”¹⁰⁶

The sources suggest that Cyrus lived to see only one of his grandchildren: Parmys, the daughter of Bardiya. Darius married Parmys shortly after taking the throne (at about the same time he married Atossa and Artystone), as part of his policy to ensure that Cyrus’ bloodline survived only through him.¹⁰⁷

Two princes, neither a direct descendant of Cyrus, also deserve mention here. They are Spitaces and Megabernes, the sons of Amytis and her first husband

Spitamas. Had Astyages defeated Cyrus, one or the other of the two men would have eventually inherited the Median throne. Ctesias relates that Cyrus granted these princes governorships in eastern Iran.¹⁰⁸ Although such treatment of deposed princes became a hallmark of Achaemenid political practice, one should suspect that, in this case, Amytis exerted her considerable influence to ensure that Cyrus not only spared but indemnified her sons. That neither Spitaces, Megabernes, nor their descendants factored into the power struggle of 522–521 BCE indicates that Cambyses may have had them killed as part of his efforts to make himself the sole heir to the Median throne. If perchance the two Medes survived Cambyses' purges, they may have fallen victim to those of Gaumata, who, as Darius declares, slew many people who had formerly known Bardiya.¹⁰⁹

Plans to Invade Egypt

Cyrus' conquests had made the Medes and Persians wealthy enough, but he had at least one more gift in mind for them: Egypt the last remaining of the old Eastern powers. The *Cyropaedia* provides that Cyrus added Egypt to the Persian Empire, but this is incorrect, for the conquest of Egypt represented the great achievement of Cambyses' reign.¹¹⁰ Xenophon may have intended to glorify Cyrus or he may have mistaken information gleaned about the Persian founder's plans to invade Egypt for an actual conquest. Herodotus included Egypt among the countries that Cyrus planned to subdue after conquering Lydia, and Second Isaiah uttered an

unfulfilled prophecy that the Persian king would annex Egypt, Nubia, and Sheba in southeastern Arabia.¹¹¹

Any campaign against Egypt would have required serious preparation. Egypt had a large population, and the pharaohs reigned supreme over the hearts and minds of their subjects, whom they could mobilize at a moment's notice. The Egyptians could field excellent heavy infantry recruited from their own native warrior caste, as well as from abroad. Particularly daunting were the approximately 30,000 Greek and Carian hoplite mercenaries that the pharaoh Amasis maintained in his service.¹¹² Egypt's geography also presented serious obstacles to would-be invaders. To the east of the Nile was a vast, inhospitable desert, which extended into the Sinai Peninsula and beyond. Ancient armies could traverse this barren wasteland only along the Mediterranean coast, and even then, water had to be supplied by the coordinated action of a fleet or the charity of the local Bedouin. Guarding this narrow coastal strip was the powerful stronghold of Pelusium, located approximately eighteen miles south of modern Port Said. One of Egypt's three great frontier fortresses, Pelusium could accommodate a garrison of 10,000 Greek hoplites and native troops.¹¹³ Foreign invasions also had to be perfectly timed to avoid the summer flooding of the Nile, which, before the construction of modern dams, turned the surrounding river valley into a swampland. Throughout history, this annual event has repelled many invading armies, by bogging them down and forcing them to fight for every dike and levee until their supplies diminished.

Most importantly, the Egyptians were not prone

to remain inactive while the Persians prepared to invade their country. The pharaohs traditionally guarded against foreign invasion from Asia by using the small kingdoms of Syria and Palestine as a buffer. However, this policy became increasingly untenable with the Persian conquest of Babylonia, which gave Cyrus possession of the entire Levant, with the possible exception of Gaza. Indeed, it has been claimed that Cyrus' principal motivation for restoring the Jews to their homeland was to establish a community in Jerusalem that would be loyal to Persia and opposed to Egypt. In this connection, Herman Wallinga has argued that Cyrus' subjection of Syria and Palestine forced Amasis to follow an alternate strategy aimed at containing the Persians through control of the seas.¹¹⁴ Specifically, Wallinga has argued that Amasis entered into an alliance with the tyrant Polycrates, who had seized power in the Aegean island of Samos around 540 BCE. Polycrates was for some years an enemy of Persia and had built a fleet of 100 penteconters (a type of galley with twenty-fifty oars on each side) with which he raided settlements under Persian control.¹¹⁵ According to Wallinga, Amasis subsidized Polycrates' construction of these warships, which could transport large numbers of Greek mercenaries to and from Egypt. The idea was for the mercenaries to terrorize coastal cities, so as to pin down Cyrus' soldiers within their garrisons and prevent them from mobilizing for an Egyptian campaign. Wallinga's reconstruction supports Max Mallowan's theory that Cyrus raised fortifications at various locations between the Gulf of Issus and southern Palestine to sustain a defensive bulwark against Egyptian aggression.[†]

A natural complement to any such defensive strategy would have involved the neutralization of Cyprus. Not only did this island supply Egypt with copper and wood, but it served as an important landfall for ships sailing between the Nile Delta, the Aegean Sea, and the Levant. Cyprus was apparently a tributary of Egypt when the Persians first occupied the lands west of the Euphrates; however, things would soon change. Xenophon claims that Cyrus imposed tribute upon the Cypriotes, and Herodotus states that Cyprus supplied ships for Cambyses' campaign against Egypt.¹¹⁶ The two statements are not contradictory, although some scholars insist that the island recognized Persian rule only under Cambyses. In assessing the evidence, we should note that the Cypriotes retained a strong measure of local autonomy throughout the entire period of Persian rule, during which they, like the Phoenicians, were governed by local vassal kings. The implication is that Persian control over Cyprus was not very firm, and the disagreement in the sources about which Persian king subjugated the island likely owes to differences in opinion as to when Persian influence reached the level of actual domination. Preclusion from Cypriote ports probably constituted one reason why the Samian Polycrates eventually abandoned his alliance with the pharaoh.¹¹⁷

Evidence of more concrete actions against Egypt may exist in Polybius' statement that the Persians stormed Gaza, which may have been allied to or dependent upon Egypt at this time.¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, the context of this passage is unclear, so we cannot be sure that it alludes to events that occurred during Cyrus' reign. It may refer to operations conducted by

Cambyzes or Artaxerxes III, or, as Maximilian Duncker would have it, an expedition mounted by Cyrus' generals to clear the path for a full-fledged invasion of Egypt.¹¹⁹ Gaza was the last major stop on the road to Pelusium and would serve as Cambyzes' military headquarters during the build-up to the Egyptian campaign of 525 BCE.¹²⁰

Whatever the truth, Cyrus probably deserves more credit for the Persian conquest of Egypt than he receives, as Cambyzes may have simply executed the master plan that his father devised. Cyrus himself could not launch the expedition, because a far more dangerous enemy was lurking at the opposite end of his empire. To repel this foe Cyrus would need all the might he could muster.

¶ The saga of the powerful satrap Megabyzus, whose relationship with Artaxerxes I was marked by intermittent periods of hostility and friendship, demonstrates the point. On one occasion, Megabyzus was sentenced to death for saving Artaxerxes from an attacking lion, because, in so doing, he had broken the cardinal rule that required the king to cast the first spear during a hunt. The purpose of this rule was to protect the monarch against persons seeking to present themselves as better candidates for the throne based on their superior hunting skills. Fortunately for Megabyzus, the pleas of the royal women stayed Artaxerxes' wrath, and rather than have his head cut off, the satrap was exiled to the Persian Gulf, whence he returned some five years later when the capricious Artaxerxes decided to make him his tablemate.

** Herodotus' passage is reproduced on page 20.

† See page 394.

‡ Xenophon deemed a political motive for Cyrus' marriage to Amytis unseemly for the hero of the *Cyropaedia* and so wrote that the princess had grown up loving Cyrus, who used to play with her when she was a child. To make the romance believable, Xenophon further portrayed Amytis as the granddaughter, as opposed to daughter, of Astyages: "And to this day people still tell of her wonderful beauty (But some historians say that he married his mother's sister. But that maid must certainly have been a very old maid)." It is perfectly conceivable that Astyages, who probably maintained a fairly extensive

harem, could have sired a daughter younger than Cyrus, and if we are correct in making Atossa the daughter of Amytis, then we should understand that Amytis was probably not older than forty when Cyrus married her. Xenophon's description of the betrothal ceremony may be partially factual: "[Amytis] brought him a golden crown and bracelets and a necklace and the most beautiful Median robe that could be found. As the princess placed the crown on Cyrus' head, [her father] said, 'And the maiden herself, my own daughter, I offer you as well, Cyrus, to be your wife . . . And with her I offer all Media as a dowry, for I have no legitimate male issue.'" See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.5.17–8.5.19, 8.5.28.

§ Ctesias portrays Amytis as a forerunner of Parysatis, the manipulative wife of Darius II who influenced both her husband and son, Artaxerxes II, to steer the course of Persian politics for nearly twenty years, during which she put to death many of her enemies. Thus, Ctesias has Amytis execute the eunuch Petesacas and drive Oebaras to suicide in revenge for their supposed murder of Astyages. Ctesias' stories are of no account, however, for Astyages was never murdered and the Babylonian Chronicle states that Oebaras died of a stroke within a few weeks of Cyrus' conquest of Babylon.

¶ By contrast, Darius I had at least a dozen children, born to him from at least six wives, and Artaxerxes I sired seventeen sons from his wives and concubines. Even these numbers pale in comparison to the crowded harems of the later Achaemenid kings. Artaxerxes II is said to have 115 sons by his concubines, in addition to the three sons born to him from his wife Stateira.

** For example, Ctesias reports that Parysatis, the half-sister and wife of Darius II, gave birth to thirteen children, only four of whom lived to maturity. Ctesias claims to have heard this information from Parysatis herself, who was his patient. Infant mortality may have been a more acute problem for Cyrus, who was constantly on the march and whose wives may have given birth while accompanying him on campaign.

† The romance of Panthea and Abradates is purely fictional. Nevertheless, Xenophon's account is informative as to Persian customs and Cyrus' overall reputation.

‡ See page 215.

§ For example, when Cambyses allegedly put Bardiya to death, he did so secretly, so that the people would not know. Later, when the usurper claiming to be Bardiya rose against Cambyses in 522 bce, the Persians, Medes, and other peoples all went over to him. Even after the usurper's overthrow, a second upstart claiming to be Bardiya seized control of Persia and other Iranian provinces. That Bardiya's name became a rallying cry for popular uprisings years after his

removal from the public eye demonstrates the extent to which this prince had captured the hearts and minds of the Iranian masses.

¶ See endnote 37 on page 672, which discusses possible allegorical references to Bardiya as Spentodata.

** See Appendix XVII.

† The list of fortified sites includes Sidon, Byblos, Banyas, Marathus, Jerusalem, and Lachish; see Mallowan (1985), 409.

The Way of the Warrior: Cyrus' Death in Central Asia

But now, if I die, I leave you, my sons, whom the gods have given me, to survive me, and I leave my friends and country happy; and so why should I not be justly accounted blessed and enjoy an immortality of fame?

—Cyrus' Deathbed Address, according to Xenophon

The barren wastes of the world's steppe lands have been compared to the oceans in terms of the obstacles they present to human habitation.¹ During the sixth century BCE, the inhospitable landscape of the Eurasian steppe was home to the Sakas, Scythians, and other horse-riding nomads, who regularly roamed vast distances in search of green pastures and oases, to which they could relocate their families and herds, if for only a little while. Theirs was a difficult existence. Violence and warfare were intrinsic to survival, as competition for resources was fierce, and robbery represented the most viable way of life. Hardened by their environment, the steppe nomads were a people of the sword, cruel and merciless. This was well

known to Herodotus, who relates how the European Scythians worshipped their war god in an annual ceremony by planting a blade atop an elevated platform and then putting to death on the ground below it one out of every hundred men that they had taken prisoner during the previous year.² The same Scythians drank the blood of the first man they killed in combat and scalped their foes, using the skins to decorate their cloaks and quivers.³ Each man among them further collected the skulls of the enemy warriors whom he slew and, by hollowing them out and encasing them in metal, converted the skulls into drinking vessels.⁴ The man with the most such cups enjoyed the highest social standing, for he was by necessity also the greatest warrior.

Grisly customs of this sort testify to the importance of martial heroism among the steppe nomads. Although our understanding of the Scythian and Saka religion is limited, we may surmise that the nomads shared much the same moral outlook as the early Indo-Iranians or even the Norsemen of Scandinavia, for whom bravery in battle was the greatest virtue, irrespective of whether the battle itself served a noble purpose. That the steppe nomads were close relatives of the western Iranians simply mired in a more archaic and savage way of life is for the most part true. The classical authors indicate that the Medes and Persians could communicate with the Scythians and Sakas without interpreters, and the two groups shared many of the same myths and legends.⁵ But as their ways of life diverged, so, too, did their attitudes toward each other.

The threat of a nomadic attack was very much a part of day-to-day life for the sedentary inhabitants of

the Achaemenid Empire's northeastern frontier provinces. This condition was not without its benefits. Hostile interactions with the steppe nomads hardened the eastern Iranians and infused them with a potent military vigor.⁵ The protection of the Achaemenid Empire's vast northeastern frontier represented one of the most important objectives of the Persian kings. That the sources do not mention any catastrophic nomadic incursions from Central Asia during the Achaemenid period demonstrates that the Persian kings achieved their goal of maintaining a strong barrier against the marauding tribes of the steppe. Their success in this regard must rank among the great accomplishments of the Achaemenid era and had important consequences for all the civilized nations of the Near East, who only a few generations before Cyrus' rise to power had endured devastating Scythian and Cimmerian raids that advanced as far west as the Aegean Sea and as far south as the borders of Egypt.

Cyrus himself was particularly dedicated to safeguarding the northeastern frontier of his empire. During the second decade of his reign, he had ordered the construction of seven frontier-fortresses in Transoxiana and Bactria to keep the dangerous steppe tribes at bay.⁸ The quasi-legendary accounts of his wars against the steppe nomads further demonstrate that the Persian conqueror presented himself to the traumatized agricultural peoples of eastern Iran as a champion of sedentary civilization.⁹

But Cyrus could hardly have known whether his protective efforts would suffice. The Persians lacked detailed information about the steppes to the north of the Jaxartes River (the present-day Syr Darya), although they seem to have recognized that the far-off

movements of unknown peoples in Inner Asia could send waves of warlike hordes crashing out of the steppes.⁶ Memories of the last great nomadic eruption, which carried the Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sakas into western Iran and beyond, were alive and well among the Medes and Persians of Cyrus' day.⁷ They must, therefore, have been constantly on the lookout for news of distant rumblings in the steppe lands. It was with a wary eye, no doubt, that the sentinels of Cyropolis and the other northeastern frontier-fortresses of the Achaemenid Empire gazed into the great unknown, scouring the horizon for any sign of the ominous dragon or wolf-shaped banners that marked the approach of the nomadic war bands.⁸

Around 530 BCE, Cyrus received word of a great danger materializing in the barrens of Central Asia. It was to confront this menace that he embarked on what would prove to be his final campaign.

The Nomads of the Caspian Steppe

The circumstances of Cyrus' final campaign and death remain obscure. At a glance, the sources do not even agree about the identity of the nomadic enemy whom Cyrus fought. According to Herodotus, Cyrus directed his campaign against the Massagetae, a fearsome nation of warriors who lived to the north of the Araxes River.** Herodotus calls some of the Massagetae "Fish-Eaters," and they must be equated with the Apasiacae or Abian Scythians, whom Alexander's chroniclers recognized as Cyrus' enemies.⁹ These tribesmen resided in the delta lands of the Oxus

and Jaxartes, hence the proposed derivation of their name from Old Iranian **Apa-Saka*, meaning “Water-Sakas.”¹⁰ In his summary of Ctesias’ *Persica*, Photius gives a different name for Cyrus’ foes. Specifically, he identifies them as the Derbices, whom Strabo and other classical authors situate in the plains between the Caspian and Aral Seas.¹¹ These nomads were famous for preying upon the settlements of ancient Hyrcania, where archaeologists have found evidence of vast mud-brick fortifications that the Sasanids raised to seal off this exposed flank of the Iranian plateau. Another source, Berossus, provides that Cyrus marched against the Dahae, a nomadic people closely affiliated with the Massagetae and Derbices.[†]

These seemingly disparate accounts may be reconciled on the basis that each of the aforementioned tribes once belonged to a single confederation, known as the Saka Tigrakhauda, or “Pointed-Hat Sakas.”¹² Operating like a medieval Mongol horde, these Sakas exercised dominion over a vast region, from the delta lands of the Oxus and Jaxartes to the Caspian Sea. They were steadfastly devoted to Mithra, hence Herodotus’ (probably embellished) statement that the only god the Massagetae worshipped was the sun, to which they sacrificed horses.¹³ As their name implies, the Saka Tigrakhauda distinguished themselves from other nomadic groups based on their headgear. Achaemenid bas-reliefs show these Sakas wearing a variation of the basic nomadic riding outfit that featured an extravagantly tall, conical hat. Like the ancient Iranians, the Sakas associated tall headgear with high social status. So we may surmise that, at least in their own eyes, the Saka Tigrakhauda considered

themselves to be the most dominant nomadic group: the only one that could legitimately don the upright hat.

Cyrus had dealt with these Sakas long before 530 BCE, so he must have known what to expect in terms of their tenacity and battle tactics. The ethnographic information provided by the classical authors indicates that the Saka Tigrakhauda were the main nomadic horde to overrun Media during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, and Cyrus presumably learned about their wild ride across the Iranian plateau from his early days at Ecbatana. The Median minstrels never tired of recounting the wars waged against the steppe nomads, and the information that they failed to provide Cyrus presumably picked up in conversations with actual Saka chieftains who had settled in Media and frequented his grandfather's court. That the Saka Tigrakhauda maintained a strong presence in Ecbatana during Astyages' reign is likely. These nomads formed an integral part of the Median army, in which they played a role comparable to that of the Qizilbash Turks, who, some two thousand years later, formed the military backbone of the Safavid state. The Saka Tigrakhauda were particularly famous for their heavy cavalry, as they were among the first people to equip their battle-steeds with bronze armor.¹⁴ Median nobles entrusted their boys to Saka chieftains for martial training, and having spent much of his youth in Ecbatana, Cyrus presumably learned to fight at the feet of a Saka war-master.¹⁵ This experience must have given Cyrus a firm appreciation for the military might of this nomadic people, a lesson reinforced in his later years, when he commanded and fought against different groups of these Sakas, not just in western

Iran but also in Chorasmia.

The Persian conqueror presumably recognized the Saka Tigrakhauda of Central Asia as the greatest foreign threat to his empire, and this understanding must have imbued him with a strong sense of purpose in dealing with these nomads. After all, Cyrus' legacy in Iran was largely founded upon reversing the catastrophic consequences of the nomadic invasions of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. His dedication to nurturing agricultural settlements, instituting a centralized system of political rule, and establishing a state religion that favored a benign, ethical deity over the warrior-god Mithra may all be viewed within this context. The Persian conqueror likely feared that history would repeat itself were the steppe nomads to once more gather their strength, and the stress of this knowledge must have weighed heavily on his mind during his campaign against the Saka Tigrakhauda.



Relief from Persepolis showing a Saka Tigrakhauda with his distinctive headgear.

Death on the Northeastern Frontier

Where Cyrus was when he obtained the intelligence that precipitated his march against the Sakas no one knows. According to Herodotus, the Persian king attacked these nomads out of sheer aggression, simply because he wanted to add their lands to his empire. Nevertheless, scholars have long recognized that Herodotus' historical method is at its weakest here; the historian's firm belief in Attic tragedy necessitated that Cyrus fall from grace due to his own hubris, so the portrait Herodotus paints of Cyrus during the latter's final campaign differs considerably from the image of the just king found elsewhere in *The Histories*.¹⁶ Most scholars actually believe that Cyrus hastened to the northeastern frontier of his empire in response to one or more brutal Saka raids.¹⁷ His objective was probably twofold: first, to drive the Sakas out of his territory and, second, to ravage their country to prevent further assaults upon settlements under Achaemenid control. In this connection, it is worth noting that, like the Roman emperors, the Persian kings occasionally overstepped the boundaries of their empire in order to deter the savage tribes living beyond them from invading their domain.¹⁸

Herodotus claims that Cyrus was sure of victory for many reasons, the two most important being "the legend of his superhuman origin and the success of all his previous campaigns; for it was a fact that till then it had been impossible for any nation to escape, once

he had marched against it.”¹⁹ Yet, the conqueror’s own actions suggest no such overconfidence. Herodotus provides that Cyrus reaffirmed Cambyses as his successor before setting out on campaign, and Babylonian cuneiform tablets show that Cyrus made Cambyses his co-regent late in the summer of 530 BCE.²⁰ There was perhaps nothing odd in Cyrus raising Cambyses’ profile at this critical juncture, for Herodotus elsewhere relates that Persian law prohibited the king from marching with his army before he had designated his heir. But this law may not have existed at the time of Cyrus’ expedition, and thanks to Herodotus, we know that the conqueror took the extra and unusual precaution of having Cambyses accompany his army all the way to the Araxes River, which formed the boundary between the Persian Empire and the land of the Saka Tigrakhauda. Cyrus clearly felt it necessary to present Cambyses as his successor to all the subject nations that lay on his path, many of which were governed by, and loyal to, his younger son Bardiya.²¹

The sources provide different accounts of the actual military enterprise, and these agree only with respect to the broadest details. According to Herodotus, whose narrative is the most robust, Cyrus sent a messenger to Queen Tomyris, the leader of the Massagetae, to sue for her hand in marriage, but the Saka queen refused, for she knew full well that “Cyrus was wooing not herself but her dominions.”²² Cyrus then began building a pontoon bridge for the conveyance of his army across the Araxes. That the bridge was lined with wooden towers betrays his expectation that the Sakas would defend the crossing. The bridge was still under construction when Tomyris

sent a courier with the following message: “King of the Medes, I advise you to abandon this enterprise, for you cannot know if in the end it will do you any good. Rule your own people, and try to bear the sight of me ruling mine. But of course you will refuse my advice, as the last thing you wish for is to live in peace. Listen then – if you are so bent upon trying your strength against the Massagetae, give up the laborious task of building that bridge, and let my army withdraw three days’ march from the river, and then come over yourself. Or, if you prefer it, retire the same distance yourselves, and let us meet you on your side of the river.”

Tomyris’ message prompted Cyrus to call a meeting of his officers to discuss the proposal. The majority favored engaging the Sakas on Persian soil, but Croesus advised Cyrus against the idea. The former Lydian king declared that the Sakas would likely drive for the heart of Cyrus’ empire if they won a battle within its borders, whereas the Persians would benefit more from defeating the Sakas in their own country. Cyrus agreed with Croesus, who further proposed a stratagem for ambushing the enemy. The plan called for the Persian army to advance into Saka territory, establish a camp, and prepare a banquet with all sorts of exquisite dishes and plenty of wine. The Persians would then return to the river, leaving behind a detachment of inferior troops to guard the camp and the sumptuous feast. This would entice the Sakas to seize the camp and partake of the food and victuals, after which the Persians could surprise them in their drunken stupor. Pleased with the plan, Cyrus notified Tomyris that the Sakas should withdraw from the river and prepare to do battle in their own

country.

According to Herodotus, before crossing the Araxes, Cyrus arranged for Cambyses to return to Persia, along with Croesus, whom Cyrus instructed Cambyses to treat with respect, should the expedition fail (ostensibly because he feared that Cambyses might blame Croesus for providing bad advice). On the first night after the crossing, Cyrus had a dream in which he saw his Achaemenid cousin Darius, the eldest son of Hystaspes and grandson of Arsames, with two wings on his shoulders; one wing shadowed Asia and the other Europe. Cyrus interpreted the dream as a sign from heaven that Darius planned to conspire against him. He accordingly summoned Hystaspes to his tent and informed him of his suspicions. Hystaspes responded that any Persian ungrateful enough to plot against Cyrus deserved to “die on the spot”; so on the following morning, the conqueror sent Hystaspes back to Persia to watch over Darius, who at twenty years of age was still a cadet in training and thus too young to participate in the campaign, until Cyrus could personally examine him at a later date. What Cyrus failed to recognize in Herodotus’ view was that the dream did not signal Darius’ disloyalty but, rather, “had been sent by God to warn [Cyrus] of his death then and there, and of the ultimate succession of Darius to the throne.”

Cyrus then advanced a day’s march and implemented Croesus’ plan. As expected, a detachment of Sakas, a third of their total forces, fell upon the Persian camp and massacred its feeble guard. The Sakas then set upon the banquet the Persians had prepared for them, eating and drinking until they fell asleep. This was the signal for the Persians to attack.

They surprised the Sakas, killing some and taking others prisoner. Among the captives was Tomyris' son Spargapises, the commander of the detachment. When Spargapises came to his senses, he begged Cyrus to remove his fetters. The Persian king granted the request, whereupon Spargapises seized a weapon from one of his captors and committed suicide. On hearing of his death, Tomyris became enraged. She assembled her remaining forces and met Cyrus in the field. The ensuing battle was, in Herodotus' opinion, the most violent ever to take place between non-Greeks. The two armies first fought from a distance until they had exhausted their arrows and javelins and then fell upon each other at close quarters, using spears and daggers. At great length the Sakas gained the upper hand and killed the majority of Persians, including Cyrus. After her victory, Tomyris scoured the battlefield for Cyrus' body. Upon finding it, she had the corpse decapitated, and then shoved the head into a skin filled with Persian blood, crying aloud: "Though I have conquered you and live, yet you have ruined me by treacherously taking my son. See now – I fulfill my threat: you have your fill of blood!"

Herodotus judged this account of Cyrus' final campaign and death more trustworthy than other stories of the conqueror's end that he had heard, and several scholars have deemed it plausible. Yet, we have ample reason to discount the tale, which is burdened by folklore motifs and Herodotus' own literary requirements.²³ The most unreliable element of the story concerns the assertion that Tomyris recovered and mutilated Cyrus' corpse; this detail does not agree with the documented fact that Alexander saw the Persian conqueror's body, intact and encased

in wax, at Pasargadae in 330 BCE.

A more reliable but not entirely unproblematic account of Cyrus' death appears in Ctesias' *Persica*.²⁴ The story goes that Cyrus marched against the Derbices and, after falling from his horse during the thick of battle, was speared in the thigh by an enemy combatant. The conqueror's kinsmen rushed to his aid and hastened him to the Persian camp, where he remained as the battle ended in a stalemate, with both sides losing approximately 10,000 men. The Persians then sent word to Amorges, king of the Saka Haumavarga, a nomadic group that had accepted Persian rule several years before. Amorges rode to the Persian camp with 20,000 cavalry, and a day or two later, the Persians engaged the Derbices in a second battle. This time the Persians, who were fighting without the ailing Cyrus, won a "brilliant victory." They killed some 30,000 Derbices – including their ruler, Amoraeus, and his two sons – while losing about 9,000 men of their own. The Derbices then submitted to Cyrus, who, realizing that death was upon him, summoned his friends and family to his bedside. He declared Cambyses to be the new king and (re)affirmed Bardiya as the viceroy of the northeastern provinces. He also gave governorships to his step-sons, Spitaces and Megabernes, and bade all four princes to obey Amytis, his Median queen. His final request was for his survivors to honor Amorges, the man of the hour, and he bestowed "his blessing on those who should remain on friendly terms with one another, and a curse upon those who first did wrong." With these words, Cyrus died, three days after receiving his wound. Cambyses arranged to have his body sent back to Persia for burial.

Ctesias' version seems to be based on the official Persian story of the campaign, which whitewashes certain events. The casualty figures are suspect, and the submission of the Derbices seems too convenient (the more reliable Bisutun Inscription suggests that the Saka Tigrakhauda confederation, of which the Derbices were a part, only recognized Persian rule after Darius' campaign of 519 BCE). What seems significant is Cyrus' emphasis that his successors maintain the partnership between the Persians and the Medes, on the one hand, and the empire's Saka allies on the other. This partnership proved instrumental to the preservation of Achaemenid rule in the east, as well as to the cultivation of strong national bonds throughout the Iranian world.²⁵ Ctesias' assertion that Amorges participated in Cyrus' final campaign is thus probably accurate, as is his assertion that Cyrus was entombed in Persia.

Most other classical accounts of Cyrus' demise represent mere variations upon the stories of Herodotus and Ctesias and add nothing to our understanding of events. A few tales may be traced to independent sources, but these are either lacking in detail or utterly fanciful. For example, Berossus, who obtained his information from Babylonian archives, states only that Cyrus was killed in the land of the Dahae, whereas Diodorus makes the nonsensical claim that the nomads captured Cyrus and hung him on a cross.²⁶ If we are to believe the philosopher Onesicritus, who accompanied Alexander's army to Iran, Cyrus died of a broken heart at the age of one hundred, upon hearing of some heinous crime committed by Cambyzes.²⁷ Onesicritus' account commands no respect, but he was not the only

classical author to ascribe Cyrus a peaceful death. According to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, the Persian conqueror dreamed that an angel declared to him: "Make ready, Cyrus; for you shall soon depart to the gods."²⁸ Upon awakening, Cyrus climbed a mountaintop in Persia and performed sacrifices to Ahuramazda, Mithra, and the other gods, thanking them for a full and happy life and praying for the welfare of his family, friends, and country. He then waited three days before summoning his loved ones into his presence. When they had all gathered, he announced:

My sons, and all you my friends about me, the end of my life is now at hand . . . and when I am dead, you must always speak and act in regard to me as of one blessed of fortune. For when I was a boy, I think I plucked all the fruits that among boys count for the best; when I became a youth, I enjoyed what is accounted best among young men; and when I became a mature man, I had the best that men can have. And as time went on, it seemed to me that I recognized that my own strength was always increasing with my years, so that I never found my old age growing any more feeble than my youth had been; and, so far as I know, there is nothing that I ever attempted or desired and yet failed to secure. Moreover, I have lived to see my friends made prosperous and happy through my efforts and my enemies reduced by me to subjection; and my country, which once played no great part in Asia, I now leave honored above all. Of all my conquests, there is not one that I have not maintained. Throughout the past I have fared even as I have wished; but a fear that was ever at my side, lest in the time to come I might see or hear or experience something unpleasant, would not let me become overwhelmingly proud or extravagantly happy. But now, if I die, I leave you, my sons, whom the gods have given me, to survive me, and I leave my friends and country happy; and so why should I not be justly accounted blessed and enjoy an immortality of fame?²⁹

According to Xenophon, Cyrus then declared the

organization of his estate, bequeathing his throne to Cambyses and making Bardiya the viceroy of Media, Armenia, and Kadusia. He beseeched his sons to honor one another, as well as the gods, and gave instructions for the disposition of his body. Afterward, he shook hands with all those present, covered his face, and died.

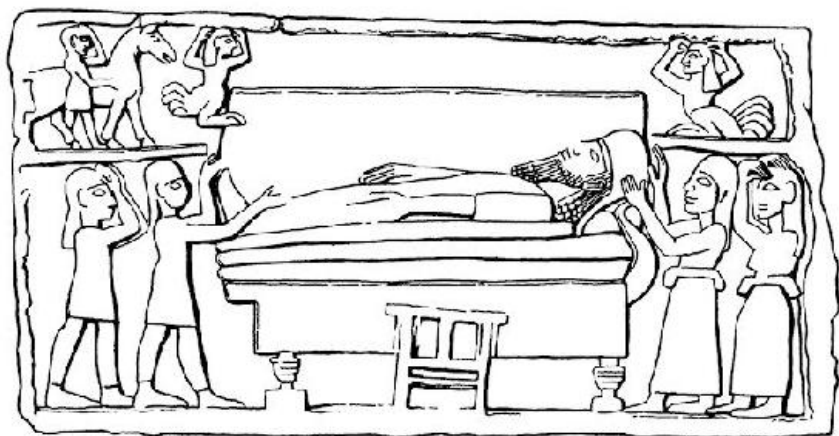
Xenophon may have deemed a violent death unbecoming for the hero of his *Cyropaedia* and so distorted the facts to fit his narrative.³⁰ However, some scholars have identified distinctly Iranian themes in Xenophon's account, thereby suggesting that the Athenian obtained his information from an authentic Iranian source.³¹ In that case, Xenophon may have accurately transmitted the Persian conqueror's last words: "If you do good to your friends, you will also be able to punish your enemies."³²

The classical accounts ultimately offer limited information with which we can put together a cohesive narrative of Cyrus' final campaign. It is certainly conceivable that Cyrus died of natural causes during the expedition and that the tales of his violent death sprang up afterward. But most sources claim that he received a fatal wound in battle, and we have insufficient grounds upon which to challenge this notion. What seems significant is that the Saka Tigrakhauda refrained from menacing the northeastern frontier of the Achaemenid Empire for another decade or so after Cyrus' campaign. As we know of no major Persian operations along this frontier during the interim, the conqueror's final expedition would seem to have been successful insofar as it had the short-term effect of discouraging these nomads from making armed excursions into Persian

territory. Cyrus had not died in vain.

Burial in Pasargadae

Cambyses may have been present at his father's deathbed. If Herodotus is correct in having the crown prince depart for Persia just before Cyrus crossed the Araxes, then Cambyses should have been able to hasten to his father's side upon hearing about his injury. Word of Cyrus' passing reached Persia and Media in late November of 530 BCE, a few weeks after the battle. The royal priests responded to the dreary tidings by extinguishing the sacred fire that had been kindled at the commencement of his reign. The last known Babylonian transaction dated to Cyrus' reign was recorded on December 4, 530 BCE.



Line drawing of a relief from Egypt showing mourners lamenting the death of a Persian king or nobleman.

Custom required Cambyses, as heir to the throne, to oversee his father's burial, which was to take place at Pasargadae; however, the situation on the frontier

was still uncertain, and Cambyses could ill afford to leave the army, lest the ambitious Bardiya assume control. He accordingly entrusted a certain Bagapates to transport Cyrus' body, which had been embalmed to prevent decomposition, to its final resting place.³³ It must have been a dismal procession that brought the conqueror's remains back to Pasargadae. Even in antiquity, the Persians were prone to dramatic demonstrations of mourning. The men who escorted the body shaved their heads, cut the manes of their horses and mules, and abandoned themselves to loud cries of grief, while in each town through which the company passed, the people crowded around the cart that carried the conqueror's remains and rent their garments, beating their chests, and wailing in lamentation.

The actual funeral ceremony at Pasargadae was a complex affair, the performance of which was perhaps postponed until both Cambyses and Bardiya could attend. The priests laid the conqueror's body to rest in his tomb, around which the members of the army marched three times while fully armed and chanting poetic eulogies.³⁴ Alexander entered this structure some two centuries later, allegedly to pay homage to the man who had been his childhood hero. From the accounts of his visit, we know that Cyrus' body was encased in wax and placed inside a golden coffin.³⁵ The coffin rested atop a large divan that had feet of hammered gold and a finely crafted Babylonian rug draped across it. Piled atop this rug were expensive tunics, robes, and trousers, variously dyed in amethyst, purple, and other colors. Necklaces and earrings of gold and precious stones were also included, along with two Scythian bows, a sword, and

a wooden shield. A small table and golden drinking cups were placed beside the divan, and the entrance to the tomb was partially sealed and enclosed with small double-doors.

As a precaution against grave-robbers, Cambyses built a small house within the same enclosure as the tomb to provide shelter to the Magian charged with guarding its treasures. According to the historian Arrian, this Magian received a sheep a day, as well as allowances of grain and wine, from the royal treasury, and his office was handed down from father to son until Alexander arrived. Once a month for over two hundred years, these Magi sacrificed a horse to the spirit of the mighty conqueror.³⁶ Thus blessed, Cyrus' soul continued to look after the country, or so it was hoped. Present-day Iranian tribesmen still pour libations of mares' milk on the steps of the tomb whenever they pass by Pasargadae on their annual migrations.³⁷

Cyrus was thus interred with all the honors befitting a hero and founder of a nation. Alexander's historians refer to an epitaph that was carved on the side of Cyrus' tomb in "Persian characters," but because the tomb bears no trace of an inscription, any such text must have been engraved on a separate stela that has long since been destroyed.³⁸ Various authors offer different translations of the inscription, which one way or another sheds light on how Cyrus wished to be remembered. According to Plutarch, whose translation is the most flowery, the text read: "O man, whoever you are, and from wherever you come (for I know that you will come), I am Cyrus, who founded the empire of the Persians. Grudge me not, therefore, this little earth that covers my body."³⁹ Strabo quotes

Onesicritus to provide a translation that accords better with the brief inscriptions found elsewhere at Pasargadae: “Here I lie, Cyrus, King of Kings.”⁴⁰

‡ See Appendix XVII.

§ See pages 178–179.

¶ See the parallels between the Cyrus legends and the saga of Kavi Husravah, as described in Appendix XVIII.

** Scholars have identified the Araxes River that marked the border between the Persian Empire and the territory of the Massagetae with various Central Asian streams, including the Atrek, Jaxartes, Oxus, and Uzboy, an old branch of the Oxus that has since dried up. The Oxus and the Uzboy seem to represent the most likely candidates, although, in the case of the Uzboy, archaeological evidence of nomadic settlement to the west of Lake Sarykamysh has not yet been discovered for the period before the late fifth century BCE.

† The name of the Dahae is reflected in that of the present-day plain of Dahestan along the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea. However, it is unknown when the Dahae occupied this plain; it may have been after the Achaemenid period.

The Empire after Cyrus

By the favor of Ahuramazda, this is the empire that I hold, from the Sakas who are beyond Sogdiana to Kush, and from India to Sardis, which Ahuramazda, who is the greatest of the gods, has bestowed upon me.

—Foundation Inscription of Darius I from Persepolis

Cyrus' soul, as the Iranians believed, hovered over his body for three days following his death, during which time it experienced great joy and inhaled the sweetest fragrances. At the end of the third day, the soul crossed the great astral bridge leading to Ahuramazda's heavenly domain, whence it would forever cast a protective watch over his house and country. What Cyrus' spirit would have seen for many decades was the continued growth of Persian political power.

After securing the empire's northeastern marches, Cambyses II prepared for the invasion of Egypt. The Persians advanced by both land and sea from the Palestinian coast to the stronghold of Pelusium, where they defeated the Egyptian army in 525 BCE. A few

weeks later, Cambyses entered Memphis, the Egyptian capital. He initially spared the life of the vanquished pharaoh, but later put him to death upon discovering that he was plotting a rebellion. Following the example of Cyrus in Babylon, Cambyses adopted the titulary of a native ruler and paid homage to the Egyptian gods, including the sacred Apis Bull. From Egypt, Cambyses extended Persian dominion as far south as Kush (Nubia) and also westward to the Greek colony of Cyrene in modern Libya. All Cyprus also acknowledged his rule.

Cambyses used Egypt as his base of operations for three years, and this proved to be too long. According to the Bisutun Inscription, a Magian named Gaumata took advantage of Cambyses' absence to pass himself off as the king's brother, Bardiya. Cambyses had allegedly put Bardiya to death before leaving for Egypt but, due to the latter's popularity, restricted knowledge of the fratricide to only a few trusted confidants. One was the Achaemenid prince Darius, the son of Hystaspes. Darius had gone to Egypt with Cambyses and was also present when the king died – of an accidental wound – somewhere in Syria or Babylonia, on the way back to confront the usurper.¹ Because Cambyses left behind no offspring, Darius assumed command of the royal army. The Bisutun Inscription states simply that Darius killed Gaumata the Magian with the help of six paladins, but the classical authors relate that he assassinated the pretender by infiltrating the latter's stronghold.

The rapid turnover of kings shook the empire to its foundations.² Popular rebellion or satrapal insubordination affected almost every major province. Darius' success in the face of such adversity testifies to

his signal political resolve and military ability. For a little over a year beginning in the autumn of 522 BCE, Darius' forces moved back and forth across the empire's core territories, crushing all opposition and restoring order throughout the realm. When the dust finally settled, there was no doubting the power or authority of the new Achaemenid king.

Justifiably proud, Darius commemorated his victory with the inscription and carvings at Bisutun. The inscription mentions Cyrus by name only once, but the legacy of the empire's founder clearly loomed large with Darius. In the text, Darius stresses his familial relationship to Cyrus and his sons and describes Gaumata's usurpation as the seizure of that kingship, which had from long ago belonged to "our family" – that is, the Achaemenid dynasty. To tighten his dynastic bond with Cyrus, Darius married two of the latter's daughters, Atossa and Artystone, as well as the princess Parmys, whose father was Bardiya. These marriages ensured that Cyrus' bloodline would survive exclusively through Darius. It is generally assumed that, once the disturbances subsided, Darius held a formal coronation ceremony at Pasargadae. As part of the ritual, he donned the founder's robes, thus signifying to all those present that he was Cyrus' true heir.³

Having thus enhanced his legitimacy, Darius re-established the empire according to the core principles formulated by Cyrus. He reaffirmed the position of the king, as well as the privileges of the leading aristocratic families, whose power Cambyzes had curbed. He then undertook several important administrative reforms aimed at strengthening Persian rule in the provinces and ensuring the steady flow of

tribute to the crown. Darius continued Cyrus' practice of collecting and codifying the laws of the subject nations, a necessary precursor to granting these nations the right of self-government. He also rigorously surveyed the economic potential of each province and redrew the map of the empire's tax districts. To facilitate trade and the taxes that derived from it, Darius issued his own coinage, the *daric*, and standardized weights and measures. He further expanded the reach of the express courier service that Cyrus had established along the empire's highways and fostered maritime commerce in both the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean.

With the wealth he accumulated, Darius built lavish palaces at various locations, including Susa and Persepolis. The palace complex at Persepolis was especially dear to Darius, who called it his "favorite place in the world."⁴ Darius also rebuilt certain sanctuaries in the imperial heartland that he claimed Gaumata the Magian had demolished. Religious differences between the Medes and Persians had come to a boil in the aftermath of Cambyses' death, and the classical authors claim that Darius inflicted a terrible massacre upon Gaumata's Magian supporters. Whereas Cyrus had honored deities revered by the Medes because of his maternal lineage, Darius was a full-blooded Persian, less compromising in his Zoroastrian outlook. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Elamite tablets from Persepolis contain no explicit mention of state-sanctioned offerings to the cults of Anahita, Verethragna, and other Iranian deities popular among the Medes. It has even been argued that Darius abjured the worship of Mithra in the Persian homeland. One might think that the powerful

king was wary of the cult of a deity capable of overshadowing Ahuramazda, whom Darius proudly hailed as the “God of the Aryans.”⁵ But if Darius recognized the utility of uniting the Iranians in the worship of Ahuramazda, he also saw good sense in following Cyrus’ policy of religious tolerance with respect to the empire’s foreign subjects. Despite initial misgivings, Darius endorsed the cults of the Elamite gods and, like Cyrus, paid lip service to Marduk in Babylonia and Yahweh in Israel. Indeed, it was Darius who brought to a completion the project commenced by Cyrus of reconstructing Yahweh’s Temple in Jerusalem. Darius also protected the privileges of Apollo’s priests in Ionia, due to the favorable oracles that this deity had uttered for Cyrus and his commanders during the conquest of Asia Minor. He further continued Cambyses’ practice of paying homage to Egyptian gods and presented himself as a native pharaoh in that land.

Although history remembers him as a skilled administrator, Darius prided himself on being a military man and conqueror. During his reign, the Persian Empire reached its greatest territorial extent, spanning from the Indus River in the east to northern Libya in the west and from the steppe-lands beyond the Jaxartes in the north to the Sudan in the south. Darius was also the first Eastern king to invade Europe, and his fixation with expanding the empire in this continent embroiled the Persians in the affairs of the mainland Greeks. Athenian involvement in the troublesome Ionian Revolt (499–492 BCE) provided the pretext for two expeditions across the Aegean Sea in 492 BCE and 490 BCE. But neither expedition made it to Athens, and Darius died somewhere between the

ages of sixty-four and seventy-two before he could lead the third campaign in person (486 BCE).

Darius was buried in the massive rock-cut tomb that he had prepared for himself at Naqsh-e Rostam, a few miles from Persepolis. The son of Hystaspes had reigned for thirty-six years, during which he wielded the royal scepter with dignity and might. He had a penchant for thinking big and acting decisively, and was, in short, a very worthy successor to Cyrus.

Darius was succeeded by Xerxes, his eldest son by Atossa. Xerxes combined in his veins the blood of Darius, Cyrus, and the Median kings.⁶ From the very outset of his reign, Xerxes dedicated himself to continuing his father's legacy. He carried on Darius' building program at Persepolis, where he completed the construction of the Apadana and other palaces, and resolved to settle the unfinished business of punishing the Athenians. Before he could achieve this military objective, however, he had to quell insurgency in Babylonia and Egypt. It is unclear whether Xerxes himself led the Persian army that quashed the Egyptian revolt in 484 BCE, but he entrusted the reconquest of Babylonia to his generals (482 BCE).

The story of Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480 BCE is well known. At first, all went well for the Persians, who crossed the Hellespont over a bridge of boats and defeated the Spartan king Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae on the same day that they trounced the Greek fleet at Artemisium. These victories enabled the Persians to sack Athens and thus punish the city for its role in burning Sardis during the Ionian Revolt. By razing Athens to the ground, Xerxes had achieved the declared objective of his campaign, but the fear that

his supplies might run out led him to engage the Greeks in the naval Battle of Salamis. The constricted waterways of the channel prohibited Xerxes' fleet from making use of its superior numbers, and the Persians were soundly defeated. This important setback, together with the defeats suffered by Xerxes' generals the following year at Plataea and Mycale, turned the fortunes of the empire in the west. From the Persian standpoint, the great lesson was that maintaining a strong presence in Europe was logistically impractical. Conquests across the Aegean Sea had to be rigorously defended, and the risk of inciting popular revolts in other parts of the empire because of increased demands for taxes and troops made it unworthwhile to do so.⁷ Henceforth, the Persian kings concentrated on preserving their possessions in Asia and North Africa.

In contrast to Cyrus and Darius, who regularly entrusted important offices to foreigners, Xerxes increased the Persian presence both in the imperial bureaucracy and the provinces. More intensely than even his father, Xerxes suppressed the cults of those Iranian gods that he deemed a threat to the worship of Ahuramazda. Presumably included within the ranks of these abjured gods were the national deities of the Medes, including Mithra and his divine acolytes. Xerxes memorialized his new policy in a famous inscription at Persepolis. The inscription begins with the customary invocation of Ahuramazda and the listing of nations subject to Persian rule. It then provides:

And among these countries there was a place where
previously the Daivas were worshipped. Afterward, by the
favor of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of the

Daivas, and I made a proclamation, “The Daivas shall not be worshipped!” Where previously the Daivas were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and the *Arta* [Truth, Order] reverently.⁸

Xerxes’ religious policies alienated some of his subjects, and his wanton mishandling of dynastic matters resulted in his assassination in 465 BCE.

The next king of the dynasty, Artaxerxes I, proved to be an astute statesman and a brave warrior, though not of the same caliber as Cyrus or Darius. The main political event of his reign occurred in 459 BCE, when Egypt revolted with the assistance of Athens, then governed by the famous statesman Pericles. The war of reconquest lasted five years (459–454 BCE) and culminated in a resounding Persian victory, when the commander Megabyzus crushed the Egyptian army and then drained one of the branches of the Nile to strand an Athenian fleet of 200 triremes. The loss of this armada was a devastating blow to Athens and justified Herodotus’ claim that “during the three generations comprising the reigns of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, and of his son Xerxes and his grandson Artaxerxes, Greece suffered more misery than in the twenty generations before Darius was born.”⁹ Five years later in 449 BCE, the Persians and Athenians negotiated the “Peace of Callias.” Although its details are subject to dispute, the treaty recognized in broad terms Persia’s right to rule over Cyprus and the Asiatic Greeks, while securing the autonomy of the Greek islands of the Aegean Sea.¹⁰

Artaxerxes’ death in 424 BCE triggered an intense power struggle among the royal offspring. Xerxes II, Artaxerxes’ eldest son, ruled for only forty-five days before his half-brother Secydanius killed him after a

drinking banquet. Secydanius then sat on the throne for a few months before he, too, was overthrown by another sibling: Ochus, the satrap of Hyrcania. Ochus adopted the throne-name Darius II, but the Greeks nicknamed him “Nothus,” or the “Bastard,” because his mother was a Babylonian concubine.

Under Darius II and his son and successor Artaxerxes II, the empire weakened considerably due to economic decline and divisions within the highest echelons of the Persian nobility. Egypt revolted in 401 BCE and would remain unconquered for some sixty years, and the satraps of the western provinces began operating with more and more autonomy. A number of these officers even maintained private armies of Greek mercenaries. Hostilities with the European Greeks broke out on several occasions, but for the most part, the empire was content to use gold and diplomacy to pit the city-states of mainland Greece against each other. Under Artaxerxes II, this policy of divide and conquer culminated in the “Peace of Antalcidas,” more appropriately known as the “King’s Peace,” which made Persia the ultimate arbiter of all territorial disputes among the European Greeks. In the hands of a more engaged monarch, the King’s Peace could have been a powerful tool, perhaps capable of changing the course of history to Persia’s benefit. But Artaxerxes was too distracted with religious matters to take full advantage of the situation.¹¹

His main concern was the creation of an all-encompassing imperial cult that synthesized the beliefs of various Zoroastrian communities, the Magi, the adherents of the old Indo-Iranian religion, and other pagan groups. Artaxerxes publicly acknowledged Mithra and Anahita in his inscriptions and set up idols

of the goddess in all the major cities of his empire.¹² By incorporating Mithra and Anahita into the official religion of the Achaemenid state, Artaxerxes helped to resolve the long-standing struggle between the Zoroastrians and the followers of the old, pagan cults and sanctioned the incorporation of pagan Iranian deities into the Good Religion as creations and supporters of Ahuramazda. Related to these developments, Artaxerxes also redefined the mystical aspects of the Persian monarchy through the incorporation of ancient Mesopotamian concepts that held the king to be the living embodiment of the cosmos. It was in accordance with these concepts that Artaxerxes expanded his harem to include 360 wives and concubines, one for each day of the year.

Satrapal revolts and murderous feuding among the numerous royal princes plagued the final years of Artaxerxes' reign. The troubled king died in 358 BCE at the age of eighty-six, and the crown prince Ochus suppressed the news of his father's passing for ten months so that he could further consolidate power before officially assuming the throne as Artaxerxes III. As one of his first acts, the new king instigated a purge of his surviving siblings, who numbered in the hundreds and were considered a threat to his rule. He then ordered the satraps of Asia Minor to disband their Greek mercenaries. The main objective of his reign was the reconquest of Egypt. His first expedition was unsuccessful (350–351 BCE), and the tax increases associated with the effort precipitated uprisings in Phoenicia and Cilicia. But this did not deter the powerful king. Artaxerxes crushed the uprisings in 345 BCE, and two years later, his armies occupied the Land of the Nile. Artaxerxes had restored the prestige of the

Achaemenid crown, and one cannot help but think that history may have played out differently had he lived longer.

That he did not survive owed to his fallout with the powerful vizier Bagoas, whom the Greeks knew to be a eunuch.¹³ Bagoas had played a prominent role in the reconquest of Egypt, and Artaxerxes had subsequently entrusted him with the supervision of the Iranian satrapies. Sensing that Artaxerxes was angry with him, Bagoas poisoned the king and murdered all his sons, except the youngest, Arses, to whom he gave the throne in 338 BCE. Arses ruled as a puppet for only two years, before Bagoas had him and his children killed, too.

The vicious kingmaker apparently doubted that he could don the crown himself, for he presented it to yet another member of the Achaemenid clan. The purges of Artaxerxes III and Bagoas had so thoroughly thinned the ranks of the royal family that the next in line for the throne was a distant cousin of Arses, a great-grandson of Darius II named Codomannus. Bagoas installed him on the throne as Darius III. Darius accepted the crown under no illusions, and after receiving forewarning that Bagoas intended to assassinate him, he deftly turned the tables and forced the murderer to drink the same poisonous draft that he had concocted for the king's consumption. The Persians remembered Darius fondly, as his benevolence represented a welcome change from Bagoas' reign of terror. But he was ill-suited to defend the empire from the great storm that was gathering in the west.

Phillip II of Macedon had spent years building a powerful and well-disciplined army based on a new

sort of phalanx, in which each infantryman wielded an extremely long spear measuring some eighteen feet. By 338 BCE, Phillip had become the master of all Greece, and two years later, about the same time that Darius III came to power, the Macedonian king declared his intention to lead a Greek invasion of the Persian Empire. An assassin's dagger prevented Phillip from undertaking this mission, but his death proved even more disastrous for Persia, for it elevated the dead king's more capable and ambitious son, Alexander, to the throne (336 BCE).

In 334 BCE, Alexander led an army of approximately 50,000 combatants into Asia Minor and won decisive victories, first against the Persian satraps at Granicus (334 BCE) and then against the royal army led by Darius III at Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (331 BCE). In both the battles in which he participated, Darius fled the field while the outcome was still very much in the air. The Macedonian victory at Gaugamela paved the way for the conquests of Babylon and Susa, both of which surrendered without a fight. The satrap Ariobarzanes made a heroic last stand at the Persian Gates in the mountain passes of Fars. But Persepolis and Pasargadae ultimately fell to the invaders, and Cyrus' ghost had to suffer Alexander entering his tomb. The Persian founder had been one of Alexander's childhood heroes, and the Macedonian king reportedly came to pay homage. However, Macedonian soldiers vandalized the monument and desecrated Cyrus' body soon after Alexander's visit.¹⁴

Alexander departed Persia in 330 BCE after burning Persepolis to the ground, supposedly in retaliation for Xerxes' destruction of Athens a century and a half earlier. The unfortunate Darius perished at

the hands of his own officers a few months later while fleeing through Hyrcania. The ringleader of the plot was the satrap of Bactria, Bessus. A cousin of Darius, Bessus claimed the throne as Artaxerxes IV and, for a few months, mounted a spirited resistance, before he was hunted down and killed by Alexander.

After Cyrus, the empire had endured the leadership of both good and bad rulers. During the watch of the less competent kings, corruption increased and Persian rule tended to become more oppressive in the provinces. However, the empire remained more or less cohesive until the end, and this was because the Persian leadership never totally lost sight of the principles of statecraft introduced by Cyrus. The fear of losing the security and local autonomy afforded them by the Achaemenids motivated many subject peoples to willingly fight alongside the Persians against the Macedonian invaders. This was especially true of the Asiatic Greeks, Phoenicians, Arabs of Gaza, and eastern Iranians. The loyalty of the Asiatic Greeks is particularly noteworthy, for it demonstrates that many of them viewed the Macedonians as outsiders and were not tempted by Alexander's promises of greater freedom.¹⁵ Finally, despite their frequent resistance against the central authority throughout much of the fourth century BCE, the Persian satraps rallied around the imperial standard in the face of Alexander's invasion. The roll call of satraps and other high-ranking aristocrats who laid down their lives at the Battles of Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela tells us all we need to know about the gallantry with which the Persian nobility defended both king and country in their final hour of need. Indeed, it was only after

Darius III had proven to be completely incapable of leading the defense that the satraps of eastern Iran turned against him in favor of Bessus.

Iran would eventually recover from the Macedonian conquest and give birth to future empires that played a prominent role in world affairs. But none would be as powerful or influential as the Achaemenid Empire that Cyrus founded.

Cyrus' Legacy

The Persians under Cyrus, possessing the proper amount of servitude and freedom, began by becoming free and then became rulers over many others. For the rulers shared their freedom with the ruled and drew toward equality; as a result the soldiers felt more friendly toward their generals and faced danger with eager spirits. Moreover, if someone among them was prudent and capable of giving counsel, the king was not jealous but allowed freedom of speech and honored those capable of giving counsel; hence a man was willing to share his capacity, in their midst, as something common. Everything prospered for them in those days because of freedom and friendship and a common sharing of intelligence.

—Plato, *Laws*

Cyrus was a warrior, statesman, and administrator of the highest order – a man of tremendous vision, with the charisma and determination to single-handedly change the course of

history. To be these things, Cyrus had to be attuned to the sociopolitical climate of the world in which he lived. During the sixth century BCE, the inhabitants of the Near East were spiritually exhausted.¹ Many had endured centuries of harsh rule under the militaristic Assyrian Empire and its successor states. Others had suffered from the traumatic invasions of the steppe nomads, who, a little more than a century before Cyrus, had ridden roughshod over all the countries between Bactria and Lydia. These victimized peoples desired what Cyrus ultimately gave them: political stability, local autonomy, and protection against marauding tribes. So great was their need that, for many nations, the acceptance of Persian rule was but a small price to pay. This contributed to both the rapid expansion and stable existence of the Achaemenid Empire for over two centuries.

The Persian Empire that Cyrus founded touched more lives than any state to precede it and the motivations underlying its policies were, of course, complex. Relations with subject peoples entailed both patronage and exploitation, reciprocal exchange and coercion, genuine care and opportunistic propaganda. However, in assessing toward which side of the ledger the Persians generally tended, we can hardly dismiss the positive reputation that Cyrus and a number of his successors garnered among the members of so many different societies. One telling indication of the unique political order heralded by Cyrus' conquests involved the heightened national consciousness of the various peoples who lived under the rule of the Persians or who otherwise interacted with them. Whereas in earlier days the Assyrians had sought to break the national spirit of conquered peoples through the

practice of population deportation and religious oppression, and whereas the later Greeks and Romans sought to impose their native educational systems upon their foreign subjects, Cyrus and his successors accepted the cultural diversity of their empire. Indeed, the policies of the Achaemenids proved pivotal to the development of a firm national identity among many of the peoples they governed, including the Iranians themselves.

Cyrus' enlightened approach to imperial rule reveals a high-mindedness shared by the great thinkers of the so-called "Axial Age." This is the term given by twentieth-century historians to the period between 800 BCE and 200 BCE, which saw the emergence of enduring ethical religions and philosophies across different cultures in response to social maladies arising from constant warfare or political oppression. One may well deem Cyrus the first great prince to espouse the nascent ideals of this era, and one may well judge his establishment of an all-encompassing, universal state as a key moment in the religious and philosophical evolution of the two most important peoples of early antiquity from the standpoint of Western civilization: the Jews and the Greeks.²

Consistent with the basic tenets of his own Iranian faith, Cyrus regarded the world as the battleground between the ethical forces of Truth and the Lie. Political disorder, social unrest, sorrow, and the overall disunity of mankind were the chief manifestations of the Lie, which Cyrus had a moral obligation to oppose. In his own eyes, his conquests and laissez-faire treatment of conquered populations promoted Truth by bringing peace and stability to the

nations and unifying a fragmented humanity. In so doing, Cyrus cleansed the world of the Lie and restored the lost “happiness,” which the Old Persian inscriptions hail as Ahuramazda’s greatest boon to mankind.³

Cyrus’ desire to bring peace and order and maximize the benefits of imperial dominion led him to establish a firm yet flexible administrative structure, predicated upon the close cooperation of government officials with local elites and the exaltation of the king, a concept to which Cyrus was quite devoted. The basic idea was “to give one man in the community the disinterestedness of unchallenged supremacy – to make him so highly privileged that no one could hope to be his rival, so that his interests were no longer pitted against those of other individuals but became merged with those of the community as a whole.”⁴ For the many Near Eastern nations accustomed to god-kings and divine-right monarchs, the notion of an all-powerful, divinely mandated ruler must have carried genuine appeal. Indeed, the common veneration of this figurehead by the Persians and those under their sway likely unified the empire on a spiritual level and, we may suppose, was as integral to the cohesion of the Persian Empire as the extensive network of roads that Cyrus and his successors built to interconnect the different parts of their realm.

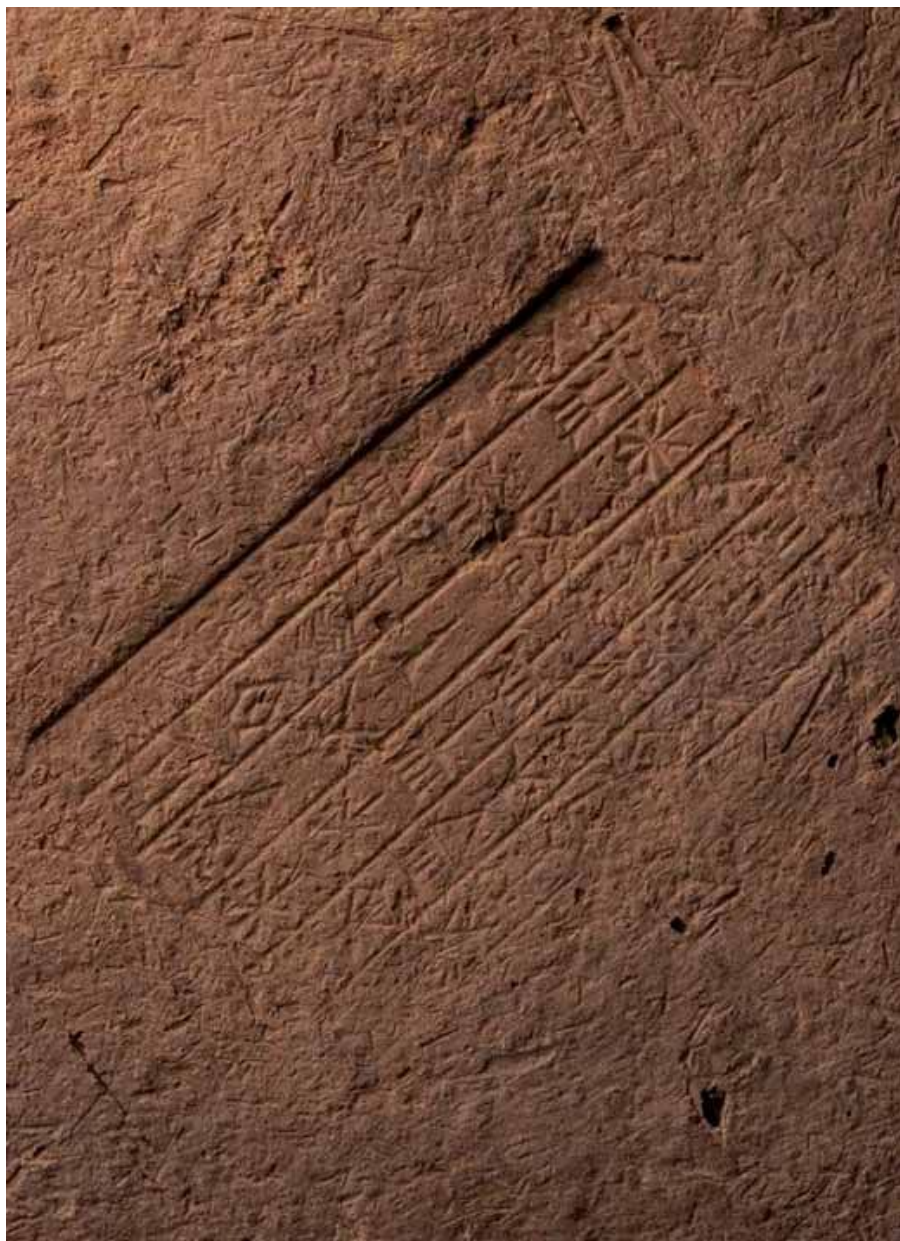
This mode of government that Cyrus established and Darius solidified was so well thought out and functional that Alexander left it largely intact after conquering the Achaemenid Empire. The Hellenistic kingdoms of Asia and Egypt were thus successors not just to the empire founded by Alexander but also to the one created by Cyrus, and Achaemenid concepts of

political rule continued in the imperial ideology of Sasanid Iran, which, in turn, exerted a heavy influence upon the development of absolutism in both the Eastern Roman and Islamic Empires.

Given the breadth of his accomplishments and the strength of his character, it should come as no surprise that so many ancient kings and generals, from Xenophon to Alexander to Scipio Africanus, looked to Cyrus as a role model. He was the dominant personality in one of the most formative periods in ancient history.



Nineteenth-century engraving of Cyrus the Great, based on the bas-relief of the four-winged guardian at Pasargadae.



A stamped brick from Ur, inscribed with the text:
“Cyrus, King of All, King of Anshan, son of Cambyses,
King of Anshan: The gods have delivered all the lands
into my hand; the land I have made to swell in a
peaceful habitation.”



Reconstruction of the Assyrian royal city of Calah by the nineteenth-century archaeologist Henry Layard. Although much of the detail reflects Layard's imagination, the painting gives a sense of what major Mesopotamian cities looked like.



Lapis lazuli head of a Persian prince from Persepolis (fifth century

BCE).



Apadana relief depicting Lydian tribute-bearers presenting drinking vessels and other finely crafted tableware.



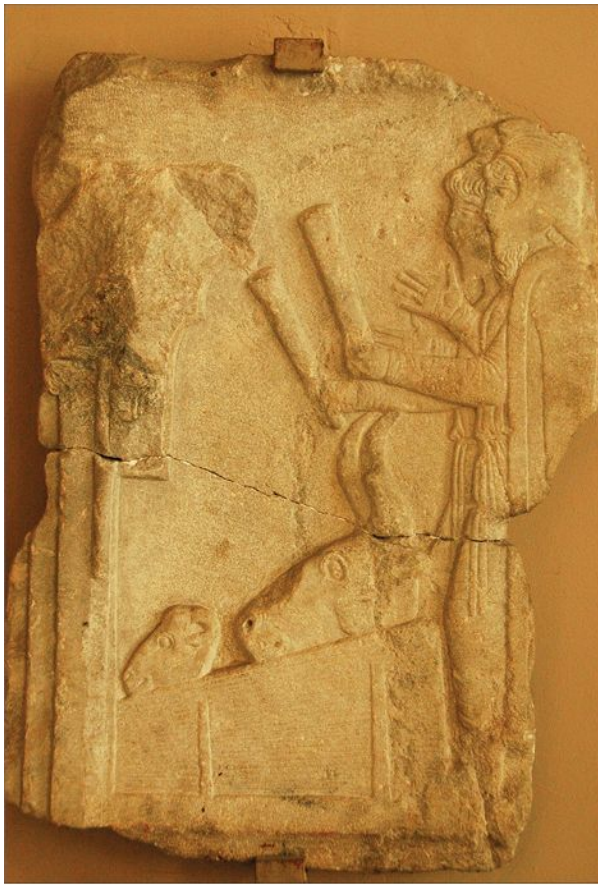
Apadana relief depicting Babylonian tribute-bearers presenting a humped bull.



The “Royal Hero” grappling with an upright lion, like the one described in the Book of Daniel.



Fragment of a relief from Persepolis depicting a lion attacking a bull.



Fourth century BCE bas-relief from Dascylium in Asia Minor depicting two Magi – each with a barsom, or bundle of twigs, in his hand – performing a sacrifice before an altar.



A dakhma, or “Tower of Silence,” outside of Yazd, Iran. The bodies of deceased Zoroastrians were exposed here pursuant to Magian custom.



Scene from the so-called “Alexander Sarcophagus” depicting Persians (or, more likely, Phoenicians in Persian attire) hunting a panther (fourth century BCE).



Fifth century BCE Lycian tomb painting in Karaburun, Turkey of a local dynast wearing a Greek or western Anatolian robe and Persian jewelry. The nobleman's attire highlights the amalgamation of different cultural traditions in Achaemenid Asia Minor



The ruins of Palace Pat Pasargadae.



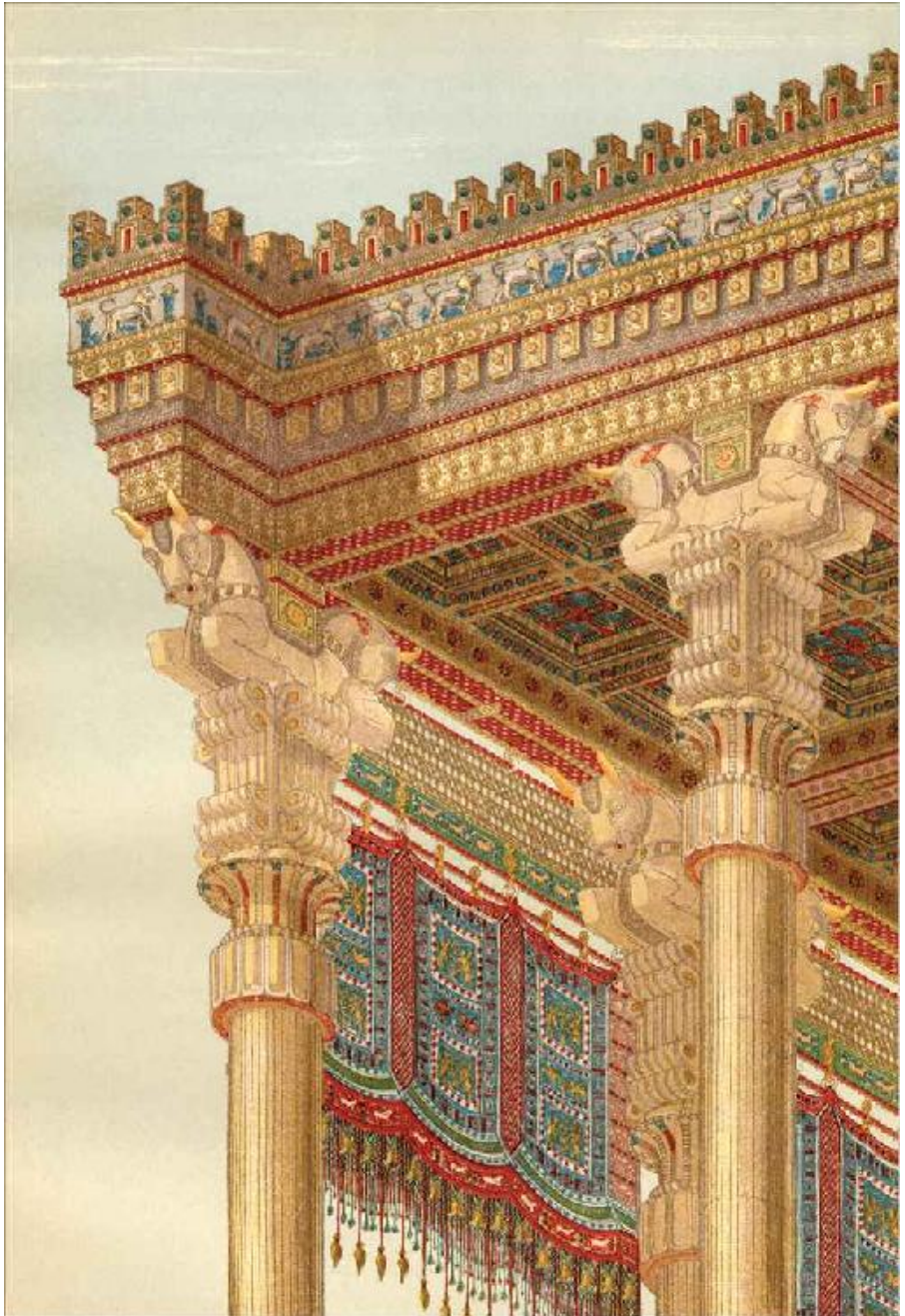
Fragments of a colored fresco from Susa showing the head of a leonine monster. Note how the lion's mane resembles the rays of the sun. Some scholars believe that most of the animals depicted in ancient Near Eastern art had astral significance.



Fragmentary relief from Pasargadae showing a fish-man, or figure draped in a cloak of fish scales, followed by a minotaur.



Line drawing of a fish-man from an Assyrian relief, which gives a sense of what the Pasargadae figure may have looked like.



Charles Chipiez's nineteenth-century reconstruction of the columns of the Apadana palace at Persepolis. Cyrus'

palace at Pasargadae may have been similarly adorned with tapestries and colored fixtures.



Ruins of the so-called “Zendan-e Soleiman” at Pasargadae.



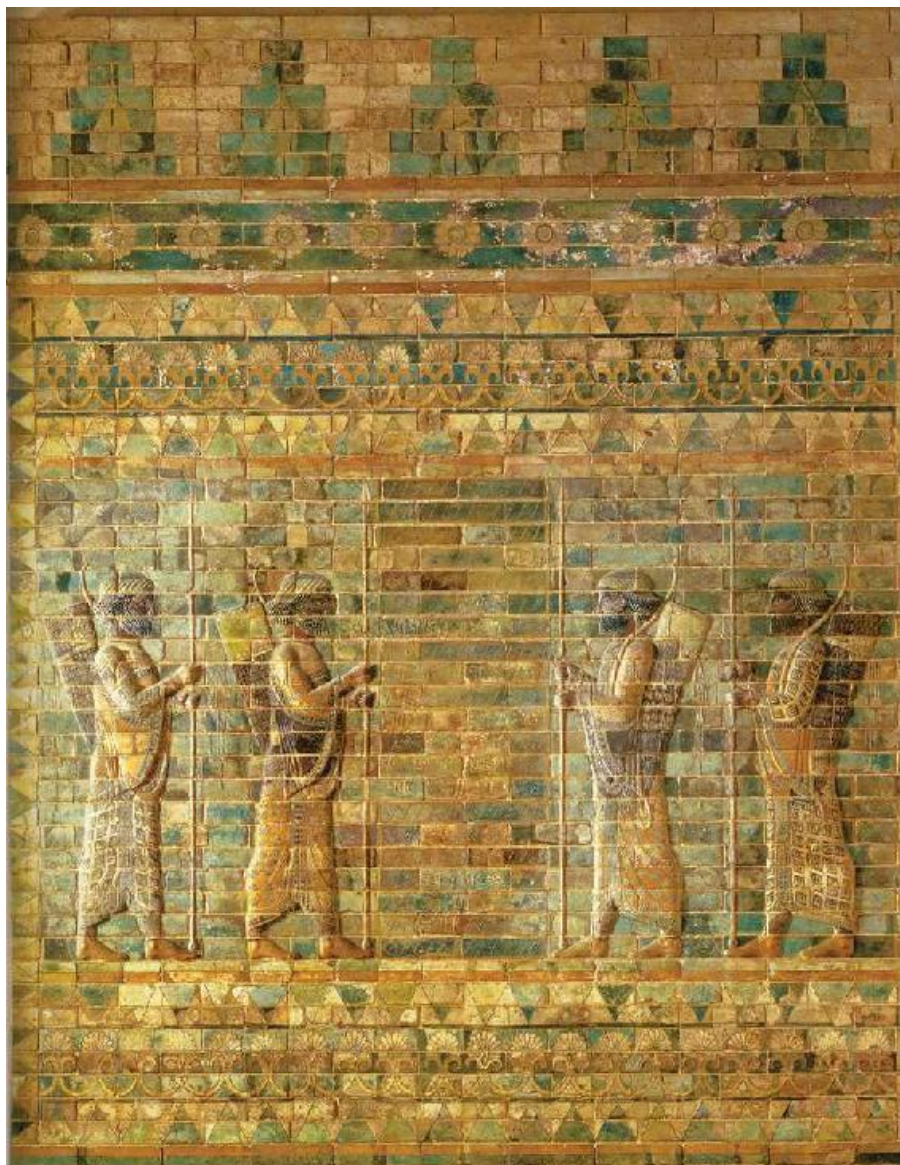
Lapis lazuli plaque from Persepolis showing a bird of prey. According to the Greeks, a similar image graced the Achaemenid royal standard.



Ruins of the Tal-e Takht, the citadel of Pasargadae.



Achaemenid silver drinking rhyton partially shaped as a griffin.



Bas-relief on glazed bricks from Susa showing soldiers of the Ten Thousand Immortals in ceremonial Elamite attire.



Bas-relief from the Hall of a Hundred Columns at Persepolis showing soldiers of the Ten Thousand Immortals dressed in ceremonial Persian costume and carrying figure-eight shields.



Fourth century BCE relief from Turkey depicting a heavy cavalryman in Persian armor. Note his squarish helmet and the shoulder plate and high neckguard of his armor.



The so-called “Alexander Mosaic” depicting Alexander the Great’s rout of the Persian army led by Darius III, who is shown fleeing in his chariot.



Fifth century BCE vase painting depicting the battle between a Greek hoplite and a Persian infantryman wearing a scale cuirass and armed with a wicker shield and spear.



The Fall of Babylon by the nineteenth-century Englishman John Martin, who specialized in painting apocalyptic scenes. Belshazzar perishes in the foreground, while Babylonian troops rush to combat near the Hanging Gardens. In fact, Cyrus took Babylon without a fight.



The Cyrus Cylinder.



Detail of *The Head of Cyrus Brought to Queen Tomyris* by the seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. The dramatic event captured in this masterpiece is based on Herodotus' account of Cyrus' demise, according to which Tomyris dipped the conqueror's head in a vessel full of blood. The story is, most likely, untrue.



Cyrus' tomb at Pasargadae.



The relief and inscriptions of Darius I at Bisutun. Followed by two attendants, Darius (the third figure from the left) tramples Gaumata the Magian while casting sentence on the nine “Kings of the Lie,” who are handcuffed and roped together at the neck. The winged-disc symbol of Ahuramazda hovers over the scene.



The ruined columns of the Apadana palace at Persepolis. Built by Darius I and Xerxes I, the Apadana once had seventy-two columns, each approximately sixty-five feet tall.



The cruciform-shaped tombs of Darius I and his successors, carved into the mountainside at Naqsh-e

Rostam. Sasanid rock reliefs appear below and between the tombs.

APPENDICES

Cyrus, Darius, and the Early History of the Achaemenid Dynasty

Tradition holds that all the Persian emperors, from Cyrus II to Darius III, were descended from the legendary chieftain Achaemenes. The presumption that Cyrus was an Achaemenid stems primarily from Darius' genealogy, as given at Bisutun and in the inscriptions of his successors, as well as from Herodotus' statement that "of [the Persian tribes] the Pasargadae are the most distinguished; they contain the clan of the Achaemenidae from which spring the Perseid kings."¹ Herodotus further relates that the prominent Persian courtier Prexaspes once "traced the lineage of Cyrus from Achaemenes downwards" at a public assembly in 522 BCE.² The Old Persian inscriptions from Pasargadae, all carved in Cyrus' name, likewise assert an Achaemenid connection. Scholars have termed these inscriptions "Cyrus, Morghab, Inscription a" (CMA), "Cyrus, Morghab, Inscription b" (CMB), and "Cyrus, Morghab, Inscription c" (CMC). The inscriptions are rather brief, and read as follows:

- CMA: "I am Cyrus, the King, an Achaemenid."
- CMB: "Cyrus the Great King, son of Cambyses the King, an Achaemenid. He says: When . . . made . . ."³
- CMC: "Cyrus the Great King, an Achaemenid."⁴

More recently, however, some scholars have raised doubts about the authenticity of these texts. Most prominently, Walther Hinz, has interpreted a vague passage from the Bisutun Inscription to proclaim Darius' invention of Old Persian cuneiform. The following are four disparate readings of this passage:

- Says Darius the King: By the will of Ahuramazda, I made a script of a different sort, in Aryan, that previously did not exist. Both on clay and on parchment it [the script] was

written. Both names and lineage [that is, the royal protocol] I had written. It [the inscription] was written and read to me. Then, I sent this script to all the lands, whose people all learned it.⁵

- Says Darius the King: “By the favor of Ahuramazda, this is the form of writing that I have made, besides, in Aryan. Both on clay tablets and on parchment it has been placed. Besides, I also made the signature; besides, I made the lineage. And it was written down and was read aloud before me. Afterward, I have sent this form of writing everywhere into the countries. The people strove to use it.”⁶
- Says Darius the King: “By the favor of Ahuramazda, I translated the [portion of the] text [summarizing my lineage] into Aryan. This [translation] had not been carved here before. On clay tablets and on parchment, the people saw that I had re-established the name and ancestry that graced the text, which was sent to the lands, after it had been written down and read aloud before me.”⁷
- Says Darius the King: “By the favor of Ahuramazda, I reproduced this text in the Aryan script, which previously existed, and on tablets and on parchment. I set forth my name and my lineage, and it was written down and read aloud before me. Afterward, I sent the text out to all the lands; the people copied it.”⁸

If one interprets the passage to relate Darius' invention of the Old Persian alphabet (which seems more likely with the first two translations), then the Pasargadae inscriptions could not have been the work of Cyrus but must be attributed to Darius, who finished the construction of the buildings where the inscriptions were placed. Why Darius would have carved inscriptions in his predecessor's name has been explained by certain scholars on the basis that the actual person whom Darius assassinated to seize the throne was not Gaumata the Magian but Cyrus' son, Bardiya. Darius thus had an immediate motive, it is said, for connecting himself to the overthrown dynasty, hence his marriages to Cyrus' daughters and granddaughter and commissioning of inscriptions portraying Cyrus as a member of *his own* Achaemenid clan. The proponents of this theory have deemed Darius' propaganda to have been so effective that it colored all future accounts of Persian history, including in the histories of Herodotus and Ctesias. Because no extant inscription carved in Cyrus' name outside Pasargadae mentions Achaemenes or the Achaemenid clan, these scholars propose

that Cyrus was not a true Achaemenid and that any Achaemenid affiliations he may have had were through his marriage to Cassandane, daughter of the Achaemenid nobleman Pharnaspes.

This theory of an elaborate cover-up rests on many assumptions and overlooks other possible explanations for the peculiarities of the evidence. As explained below, a persuasive argument exists for the Old Persian alphabet having been invented under Cyrus, if not earlier. Furthermore, Achaemenes' absence from Cyrus' inscriptions from outside Pasargadae (all of which were carved in Babylonia) may be explained in terms of consistency with Babylonian literary and political conventions. It is also possible that being an Achaemenid simply did not mean as much to Cyrus as it did to Darius. Cyrus was raised at a time when the Achaemenids had yet to achieve a monopoly over the Persian kingship. Circumstances thus differed considerably from when Darius came to power, for by then the Achaemenids had ruled much of the known world for several decades, such that Achaemenid descent represented a clear marker of royal legitimacy. Finally, everything rests on the assumption that Darius falsified the record. Although much has been written about Darius' claim to legitimacy, not one ancient source accuses him of lying, either with respect to his tale of the Magian usurper or his genealogy.

The Inscriptions at Pasargadae and the Invention of the Old Persian Script

The idea that Darius invented the Old Persian script was proposed by several scholars, most notably Walther Hinz, during the 1960's and 1970's. At about the same time, Carl Nylander presented a guarded archaeological argument for why the Old Persian inscriptions carved in Cyrus' name were commissioned by Darius.⁹ Nylander's theory has been much developed in recent years by David Stronach.¹⁰ The basic gist of their argument is that the structures at Pasargadae containing inscriptions in Cyrus' name were not finished until the time of Darius and that, because carving inscriptions typically represented the last phase of palace building, Darius and not Cyrus must have authored the relevant texts. Taken together with the theory that Darius invented the Old Persian script, these scholars have proposed that Cyrus had no hand in the composition of the Pasargadae inscriptions mentioning his Achaemenid lineage.

However, two detailed studies suggest that the Old Persian script and at least some of the Pasargadae inscriptions describing Cyrus as an Achaemenid existed before Darius came to power. The first study

was performed by Richard Hallock and focuses on the CMA text.¹¹ Hallock found this text remarkable, because its cuneiform signs contain comparatively fewer wedges than those present in other Old Persian texts, including the Bisutun Inscription. Specifically, Hallock emphasized the simplicity of the signs *ku* and *ru*, both of which appear in the spelling of Cyrus' name (Old Persian *Kurush*, spelled *Ku-u-ru-u-sh*). That these signs do not occur frequently in other Old Persian texts suggested to Hallock that the script was devised in such a manner as to allow scribes to write Cyrus' name with ease, a consideration that would have made sense only if the script was invented and first applied during the reign of a ruler named Cyrus. Indeed, it is Hallock's belief that CMA, or some similar, lost inscription of Cyrus, served as the basic text used by scribes of the Old Persian language to assign letters to sounds. He further believed that, based on the assignment of signs in the Bisutun Inscription, the latter text was not composed immediately after CMA but, rather, after other texts, now lost, which contained words and characters absent from the Pasargadae inscriptions. Hallock's theory has been endorsed by Khashayar Bahari and Max Mallowan.¹²

Hallock's research is consistent with a second study, undertaken by Francois Vallat, who has evaluated the epigraphic features of the Elamite version of the CMC inscription.¹³ According to Vallat, this Elamite text contains certain ideograms and wedge-marks, which, though common in Neo-Elamite inscriptions of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, are completely unattested in Elamite texts composed under Darius I and his successors. The implication is that the CMC inscription styling Cyrus as an Achaemenid was commissioned by the imperial founder himself and not by Darius.

It is however fair to state that the Pasargadae inscriptions are mere captions and that Cyrus did not make the same extensive use of the Old Persian script as did Darius, whose extant inscriptions are the most substantial of any Achaemenid king. The greater attention paid to the use of Old Persian as a written language may have justified Darius' supposed claims to have made a new form of Iranian writing.¹⁴

The Absence of Achaemenes in Cyrus' Babylonian Inscriptions

If Cyrus authored the Pasargadae inscriptions describing him as an Achaemenid, then why did he not mention Achaemenes or the Achaemenid clan in his Babylonian inscriptions, including the Cyrus

Cylinder? Achaemenes' absence from the Cyrus Cylinder and other Babylonian texts inscribed in the name of the Persian imperial founder is understandable on the basis that these texts were prepared before the inscriptions at Pasargadae, at a time when the Persians' had not yet developed a robust tradition of monumental writing. For this reason, the authors of Cyrus' Babylonian inscriptions closely followed the literary patterns of other Babylonian and Assyrian legitimization texts, and Assyrian and Babylonian royalty of the eighth through sixth centuries BCE rarely traced their genealogies beyond one or two generations and even more seldom included their clan or dynastic affiliations in their titulary.¹⁵ The textual evidence thus indicates the absence of literary precedent for the mention of Achaemenes or the Achaemenid clan in the Cyrus Cylinder and other Babylonian inscriptions commissioned by Cyrus.

Equally important is the consideration that the main purpose of the Cyrus Cylinder was to legitimize Cyrus' rule in Babylonia. The genealogy given in that inscription, as well as in the conqueror's other Babylonian inscriptions, should be viewed in this context. Antigoni Zournatzi has recently drawn attention to the Mesopotamian conception of history as the transfer of power from one urban center to another.¹⁶ According to her, the fundamental purpose of the Cyrus Cylinder's account of the Persian conqueror's genealogy was to portray Cyrus as a city-king – the ruler of the city of Anshan – descended from other city-kings. Advertising descent from a nomadic chieftain such as Achaemenes, who, if he lived at all, likely perished before the Persians had conquered Anshan, did little to advance the image of Cyrus as a normative Mesopotamian ruler.

The circumstances under which Cyrus composed his Babylonian inscriptions thus differed from those under which Darius drafted the Bisutun Inscription. By the time Darius came to power, there had been some standardization in the manner in which Persian kings presented themselves and their ancestry in written texts. Furthermore, Darius was not writing for a strictly Mesopotamian audience. His Bisutun Inscription contemplated a wider readership, including Persians, whose sociopolitical condition had changed drastically since Cyrus' early years. Gone were the numerous kinglets who had ruled the different valleys and oases of Fars in the early sixth century BCE. For nearly four decades preceding Darius' accession, all the Persians (and indeed much of the Near East) had recognized the overlordship of a single family of kings. Achaemenid descent was therefore more important to Darius than it was to Cyrus as an indication of royal legitimacy. This was especially true, given that Darius had to fend off the claims of pretenders from other Iranian clans who strove to seize all or part of the empire for themselves.

Darius' Need for Legitimacy

A number of scholars have proposed that Darius assassinated Bardiya to become king, and some have even suspected him of murdering Cambyses.¹⁷ Those who insist upon Darius' dishonesty typically raise the following arguments: (1) Cambyses would not have killed Bardiya, because Bardiya was his only heir; (2) the Greek accounts of Darius' rise contain details that are outwardly unbelievable (for example, that Gaumata's real name was also Bardiya and that Gaumata and Bardiya shared a strong physical resemblance); (3) an allusion to Darius' untrustworthiness exists in the speech attributed to him by Herodotus regarding the merits of lying to achieve noble ends; and (4) Darius' related professions to tell the truth in the Bisutun Inscription seem excessive and reveal his own untruthfulness, in the sense that he is covering up something.¹⁸

These arguments have little merit. Xenophon provides that Cyrus' sons quarreled immediately after his death, and no matter how concerned Cambyses may have been about perpetuating his dynasty, one should think that he would not have hesitated to eliminate Bardiya, if the latter posed a legitimate threat to his rule. Regarding the fanciful narratives of the classical authors, all Greek accounts of Persian history depart from the facts to some degree, so the embellished accounts of Herodotus and Ctesias cannot be viewed as dispositive proof of Darius' dishonesty. As to Herodotus' purported allusions to Darius' propensity for lying, we should perhaps not read too much into Darius' speech about the merits of uttering falsehoods to achieve noble ends, because Herodotus is quite likely to have arbitrarily inserted that speech into Darius' mouth.¹⁹ Finally, the Bisutun Inscription is a dry and rote text, such that efforts to "psychoanalyze" Darius based on its contents alone could be misleading.

There are actually several reasons for believing Darius' tale of a royal imposter. First there was clearly something mysterious about Bardiya, as Gaumata was not the only usurper to impersonate him.²⁰ Second, not a single ancient source accuses Darius of having killed the real son of Cyrus; this point is significant, given that Darius could hardly have silenced all his enemies. Third, if Darius did, in fact, kill the real Bardiya, he could have justified the assassination on ideological grounds (for example, by claiming that Bardiya was a tyrant; that Bardiya was irreverent to the gods; that Bardiya had wrongfully seized the throne from his brother Cambyses) without resorting to such a "cock and bull" story.²¹ The burden of proof for those seeking to rewrite history is great and, in my opinion, has not

been met in the case of Darius' assassination of Gaumata.²²

If we do not reject the basic framework of Darius' account, then it becomes difficult to find a motive for his alleged creation of a false genealogy linking Cyrus to his own Achaemenid clan. According to Stronach and other scholars, Darius fabricated his genealogy by deviously inserting Teispes – the earliest named ancestor of Cyrus in the latter's Babylonian inscriptions and, in Stronach's view, a non-Achaemenid – into the Achaemenid family tree as the father of Ariaramnes.²² Under this theory, we should expect Teispes' name to have carried little weight within the Achaemenid clan, as he would not have been a real member. But this was not the case. Both Herodotus and Diodorus mention prominent Persians named Teispes, at least one of whom seems certain to have been an Achaemenid prince.²⁴ The man in question was the husband of Darius' sister, whose son, Sataspes, Herodotus describes as an Achaemenid. In ancient Iran, family names were inherited paternally, so even though Sataspes' mother was Darius' sister, what made Sataspes an Achaemenid was, in all likelihood, the lineage of his father.²⁵ Moreover, because the Teispes who sired Sataspes belonged to the same generation as Darius, he is unlikely to have been born after the latter became king. We thus have apparent evidence that Achaemenid boys were named Teispes prior to Darius' coup. The inference is that well before Darius had reason to "invent" his genealogy or to attach himself to Cyrus, members of the Achaemenid family were named Teispes. It is thus entirely likely that Ariaramnes had a father named Teispes, after whom future Achaemenids named their sons.

This conclusion is consistent with the reality of the situation facing Darius, who came to power less than eight years after Cyrus' death. Darius was bound by the memories of those around him and could not freely distort the facts. Indeed, it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to falsify Cyrus' clan affiliations, which must have been known to many of Darius' contemporaries, a number of whom had held high office under Cyrus and Cambyses.

The Sharing of Power Between the Ancestors of Cyrus and Darius

Assuming that Darius presented his genealogy accurately, we may elucidate the relationship between his branch of the Achaemenid family and the one to which Cyrus belonged. Most scholars have adopted the view that the Bisutun Inscription describes Darius' Achaemenid predecessors as having ruled "in two lines" or "in double

succession.” The usual surmise that Teispes divided his realm by granting Anshan to Cyrus I and some other Persian region to Ariaramnes finds antecedents in later Achaemenid history.²⁶ However, it is also possible that the the kingdom was not divided until sometime after Cyrus I succeeded his father. Several early Parthian kings bequeathed their estates to their brothers, and similar fraternal loyalty may have led Cyrus I to divide his realm between his brother Ariaramnes and his son Cambyses I.²⁷

Jack Balcer and others have speculated about the location of the kingdom ruled by Darius’ ancestors, but there is no evidence to support their claims.²⁸ According to Sidney Smith, the two branches of the Achaemenid family ruled over the same territory, with the supreme leader coming from one or the other of the two family lines: “It looks as if there was some arrangement which permitted alternation in succession between senior and junior lines. There are many ways of securing such alternation. Nomadic tribes often select kings by election from the royal family, and continue the practice for some little time after settlement. The aim may have been to avoid rule by a minor . . . Perhaps there had been a succession like Cyrus I, Ariaramnes, Cambyses I, Arsames, Hystaspes; the average length of reign would be some sixteen years, which accords very well with historical probabilities.”

The basic premise of Smith’s theory is sensible, although the details are unreliable; Hystaspes never claimed a “kingship,” and Ariaramnes and Arsames would have been too young to take control at the intervals suggested by Smith. However, it is not impossible that Ariaramnes assumed the responsibilities of a king while Cyrus I was old and infirm and Cambyses I too young to serve and that Arsames did the same later on, while Cambyses I was at death’s door and Cyrus II away at Ecbatana. This is all guesswork, of course, but as Vallat has shown, Darius clearly believed that his descent from Arsames justified his claim to the throne, so his ancestors probably ruled in some capacity.²⁹

Chronological Considerations

Objections to the notion of a dual kingship held by the two main branches of the Achaemenid family have been raised on chronological grounds. Teispes seems to have been dead by 640 BCE, when Cyrus I, who appears in Assyrian records as Kurash of Parsumash, paid homage to Ashurbanipal and sent his adolescent son Arruku to Nineveh as a hostage. This Cyrus was succeeded by Cambyses I, who,

if we are to believe Herodotus, was a relatively young man when he fathered Cyrus II (*circa* 600–585 BCE). Teispes' other son Ariaramnes must have been born before 640 BCE and was succeeded by Arsames, who lived until about 520 BCE. Thus both Cambyses I and Arsames seem to have born very late in their fathers' lives. A number of scholars have cited these chronological details as grounds for either rejecting the identification of Kurash of Parsumash with Cyrus I of Anshan or arguing that Darius skipped several generations in making Achaemenes the father of Teispes. Regarding the latter explanation attention has sometimes been drawn to the genealogy that Herodotus provides for Xerxes I. The Greek historian presents Xerxes as the "child of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, the son of Arsames, the son of Ariaramnes, the son of Teispes, the son of Cyrus, the son of Cambyses, the son of Teispes, the son of Achaemenes."³⁰ A minority of scholars have argued or insinuated that Herodotus somehow had better information regarding the Achaemenid family tree than Darius.³¹ But this seems improbable, and the far likelier explanation is that Herodotus erroneously grafted the true branches of the Achaemenid family into one long line.³² Accordingly, the notion that Darius shortened his genealogy remains without proof, and alternate explanations are in order for the apparent chronological disparity.

One possible explanation besides the obvious one that Cyrus I and Ariaramnes were exceptionally dilatory breeders involves the likely absence among the early Persians of settled rules of succession, such as primogeniture.³³ In fact, an argument can be made that the early Persians followed a custom of ultimogeniture, whereby the youngest son inherited his father's estate.³⁴ Such a custom may underlie the proposed etymology of Cyrus' name and could explain the apparent age disparities between Cyrus I and Cambyses I, on the one hand, and Ariaramnes and Arsames, on the other.‡ The importance of tribal alliances in securing the succession may also have been a contributing factor. Like their Median overlords, the early Achaemenids used diplomatic marriages to solidify political bonds, and the relative significance of a given alliance could have dictated which of the king's children inherited the throne.

But in the end, the likeliest explanation is that the second half of the seventh century BCE was an incredibly tumultuous period, during which the Persians were involved in numerous military conflicts against the Elamites, Assyrians, Scythians, Medes, and other peoples. The better-documented wars that the Persians waged against the Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE demonstrate that Persian aristocrats, including princes of the royal blood, were unafraid to sacrifice their lives for the welfare of the empire, so it would not be unreasonable to think that both Cyrus I and Ariaramnes lost many

sons in the battles that the Persians fought during their reigns. Heavy loss of life among the royal progeny could explain why Ariaramnes, who was many years junior to Cyrus I, obtained the second largest share of his father's kingdom, even though he presumably had several older brothers, and why Cyrus I and Ariaramnes were apparently succeeded by sons born to them after the age of forty.

‡ For the etymology of Cyrus' name, see Appendix II.

Titles and Name of Cyrus

The Title “King of Anshan”

The Elamites clearly played a pivotal role in Achaemenid history. There is evidence to suggest that the early Persian kinglets modeled their courts after those of the Elamite rulers whom they had encountered during their trek to Parsa. The Persians used Elamite scribes to fill out the ranks of their chancellery, and the widespread intermarriage of Persians and Elamites may be adduced from information found in the cuneiform sources, including the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. However, the Persians’ arrival in southwestern Iran also signaled the beginning of the extinction of Elamite civilization in the highlands of Fars. Neither the language nor the religion of ancient Elam had much of a future in this region, which became thoroughly Iranian during the sixth through fourth centuries BCE. § The acculturation of Iranians and Elamites must, therefore, have been rather one-sided – even more so than the later amalgamation of Turks and Iranians in Azerbaijan, which resulted in Turkish becoming the primary colloquial language in that part of the Iranian plateau (circa fourteenth and fifteenth centuries CE). For the Persians to have so comprehensively absorbed the indigenous Elamite population in the Zagros highlands, the Persian ruling class must have held firm to its Iranian roots.

How did the rule of Cyrus II and those of his ancestors who reigned as Anshanite kings factor into this process? The answer may rest in the very title “King of Anshan,” as well as the meaning of Cyrus’ name. Iranian history provides many examples of nomadic conquerors identifying themselves with freshly-occupied territories through the adoption of special titles, patronymics, and epithets. The most notorious case involves the Turkic forebears of the tenth century CE Sultan Mahmud (Ferdowsi’s royal patron) who presented themselves as being “of Ghazni” almost immediately after settling in

that eastern Iranian city. Their case is comparable to that of Cyrus and those of his predecessors who adopted Anshanite titulature.

The title “King of Anshan” obviously meant something to the Elamites, as well as to the Babylonians, who occasionally ruled over Anshan since the third millennium BCE. Some scholars have gone so far as suggest that Cyrus and his ancestors were ethnically Elamite.¹ The argument presumes that Darius fabricated his genealogy, such that he and Cyrus were not really blood-relatives, and the names of Cyrus and his ancestors, as far back as Teispes, are of Elamite rather than Iranian origin. However, as Wouter Henkelman has recently demonstrated following a careful review of the extant Elamite and Babylonian materials, during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, the term “Anshan” served exclusively as a toponym, never as an ethnic marker. A similar treatment occurs in the Persepolis archives, which present Anshan as a location within the Bayza Plain in central Fars. The authors of these texts mention those who hailed from Anshan in the same vein as the Iranian inhabitants of other Persian settlements. Based on this usage, we may surmise that Cyrus’ ancestors first adopted the title “King of Anshan” upon establishing themselves as the local kings of this region in central Fars. The Bayza Plain lies near several locations known to have been sacred to the Achaemenid kings. This includes the Dasht-e Morghab, where Cyrus built the royal site of Pasargadae, and the Marv Dasht, which contained the important settlement of Huvadaichaya, already prominent by 522–521 BCE, when Darius I rose to power.

The seal of Cyrus I, referred to in academic circles as Persepolis Fortification Seal *93, constitutes the earliest known evidence linking Cyrus II’s ancestors to the region of Anshan. The seal itself is now lost, though the inscription and image engraved on its surface are known from impressions left on administrative tablets found at Persepolis.² Carved in Elamite, the inscription reads: “Cyrus of Anshan, the son of Teispes.” Some scholars have interpreted the use of the epithet “of Anshan” in this inscription as evidence of Cyrus I’s Elamite heritage, but the battle-scene carved onto the seal shows a horseman, clad in the typical Iranian riding outfit, slaying adversaries dressed in Elamite garb. The image is hardly flattering of the Elamites, and Cyrus I presumably cherished it for signifying the Persian takeover of Anshan during the seventh century BCE.

But why did Cyrus II continue to use the title “King of Anshan” in the Cyrus Cylinder and other Babylonian inscriptions after he had unified all the Persian tribes? To the Babylonians, the title “King of Anshan” carried more weight than the title “King of Persia.” The Persians were, after all, relative upstarts in the Near East when Cyrus achieved his conquests. Moreover, they did not have a reputation as

being particularly civilized. By contrast, the toponym Anshan had been known to the Babylonians for thousands of years and had formed an integral part of Elamite royal ideology since the late third millennium BCE. During the second millennium BCE, the supreme rulers of Elam, a powerful, civilized state with steady diplomatic ties to Babylonia, declared themselves to be the “Kings of Anshan and Susa.” The use of Anshanite titulature in Cyrus II’s Babylonian inscriptions thus made the conqueror’s ancestral kingdom seem more impressive than it perhaps really was and his own regime less foreign to his Mesopotamian subjects.[¶]

Furthermore, because the Babylonians and Assyrians had long-recognized Anshan as an important urban center, the use of Anshanite titulature also enabled Cyrus to present himself as a traditional Mesopotamian ruler. As the Sumerian King List and other texts demonstrate, the Babylonians conceived of their history in terms of the transfer of power from one urban center to another. By presenting himself as the “city-king” of venerable Anshan – historically, the most famous urban settlement in Fars – Cyrus simultaneously placed himself “in the native Mesopotamian continuum of kingship” and differentiated himself from the savage Zagros tribesmen, whom the Babylonians deemed the bane of their civilization.³

The regional significance of the toponym “Anshan” became obsolete soon after, if not already before, Darius seized power in 522 BCE. This development had to do with the emergence of new urban centers at Pasargadae and Persepolis. Cyrus began construction at Pasargadae around 545 BCE, and work was still ongoing when he died in 530 BCE; Persepolis was founded by Darius in 520 BCE and already controlled the regional economy of Parsa by 509 BCE. Both sites were known, at least colloquially, as “Persian settlements.” Their advent meant that Anshan, which, despite its fame, had been reduced to a shell of its old self by the sixth century BCE, no longer constituted the main urban center in Fars.

On account of this development, and perhaps also because, contrary to Cyrus’ ancestors, Darius’ grandfather and great-grandfather never ruled over Anshan, Darius dropped the title “King of Anshan” in his Babylonian inscriptions in favor of the Iranian title “King of Persia.” Darius seems also to have introduced other changes to the terminology employed in royal inscriptions composed in Akkadian. Both the Cyrus Cylinder and the inscriptions of Nabonidus are replete with archaic terminology, which occurs far less frequently in later royal Babylonian texts of the Achaemenid period. Thus, the Cyrus Cylinder refers to “Media” and the “Medes” as “Gutium” and the “Umman Manda,” respectively. Nabonidus’ Sippar Cylinder, which styles Cyrus as an Anshanite ruler, also refers to the Medes as the

Umman Manda. And the same holds true for the Babylonian Chronicle's entry for 550–549 BCE. In addition to substituting the title “King of Persia” for “King of Anshan,” Darius’ Babylonian scribes also ceased to use the terms “Gutium” and “Umman Manda” in reference to the Medes (they instead used Akkadian *Madai*). The same scribes further referred to the city of Babylon by its true name (Akkadian *Bab-ilu*) rather than by its archaic aliases Tintir and Shuanna, both of which appear in the Cyrus Cylinder. Darius’ abandonment of Anshanite titulary thus coincided with broader changes regarding the literary style of Achaemenid royal inscriptions composed in Akkadian. The proper inference is not that Darius displaced the Elamites as the empire’s ruling race, as some scholars have suggested, but, rather, that Darius standardized the terminology of the royal inscriptions to avoid the excessive use of archaisms. Of course, Babylonian scribes uninvolved in the preparation of royal texts continued to employ archaic terminology in describing members of the Achaemenid house. For example, a Babylonian business tablet prepared in 507 BCE refers to Darius’ eldest son Artobazanes as the “King’s Son of Elam.”⁴

Finally, it bears repeating that not a single inscription linking Cyrus or his forebears to Anshan was composed in an Iranian language (indeed, no Iranian script may have existed when these texts were drafted). On the other hand, it is exceedingly likely that the Persians recognized the same rulers by Iranian titles – hence Ashurbanipal’s mention of Cyrus I as the “King of Parsumash” and the reference in the Babylonian Chronicle to Cyrus II as the “King of Parsu.” These titles seem to reflect Old Persian *Khshayathiya Parsaiy* (“King in Persia”), an archaic designation known from Darius’ Bisutun Inscription.

The Names “Cyrus,” “Cambyses,” and “Teispes”

The names “Cyrus” (Old Persian *Kurush*), “Cambyses” (Old Persian *Kambujiya*), and “Teispes” (Old Persian *Chishpish*) lack the obvious Iranian elements present in the names of Darius I and his predecessors (for example, *aspa* or “horse,” *arsha* or “hero,” *Ariya* or “Aryan”). This has led some scholars to suggest that the names are of non-Indo-European origin. Over a century ago, Friedrich Carl Andreas suggested that “Cyrus” was an Elamite name, and some recent scholars have reiterated his view.⁵ However, there is no reason to think that these names are not Iranian in origin.⁶ Two of the names actually appear in different quadrants of the Iranian world before and after the Achaemenid period. The Greek and Roman authors mention a Cyrus

River and the district of Cambysene in Armenia, and both Indian and classical texts refer to the horse-breeding tribes of the Kurus and Kambojas in eastern Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Iranian ethnicity of these tribes is apparent from their language, customs, and geographical dispersion.⁷ A connection between their names and those of the Anshanite kings seems evident, and it is reasonable to suppose that, during the great “folk-wanderings” of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, the Sakas drove groups of the Kurus and Kambojas to migrate as far west as Armenia, where they gave their names to the river and district mentioned above, and to Persia, where they established some sort of connection with the early Achaemenids.⁸ This connection manifested itself in the names of Cyrus I and Cambyses I.

A strong case exists for “Cyrus” meaning “youngest son” or “hero” in several Iranian languages, and this would be a fitting name for both a person and a tribe.⁹ “Cambyses” can also be explained in Iranian to connote “power,” “bravery,” or “handsomeness” and likewise represents an apt designation for individuals as well as tribal groups.¹⁰ “Teispes,” too, can be traced to an eastern Iranian root **chap* or **chishp*, meaning “strength, leadership.”¹¹

A fair assessment is that these names belong to a different and more archaic genre than most other attested Median and Old Persian names. For example, the putative etymology of the name “Cyrus” seems to recall the old custom of granting succession to the youngest son, a practice mentioned in the common legends of the eastern Iranians and Scythians.¹² That the memory of such legends was embodied in an elite Persian name of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE speaks to the persistence of ancient Iranian traditions in the Persian homeland and among the Anshanite kings in particular. Taken together with the proposed Iranian etymologies of the names “Cambyses” and “Teispes” and the postulated link with the Kurus and Kambojas, a stronger case exists for connecting this branch of the Achaemenid family to eastern Iran than to Elam.¹³ Such a connection could explain the immense popularity that the Achaemenid emperors later enjoyed among the inhabitants of “Upper Asia,” that is, the Iranian world.

But we do not need linguistics to confirm that Cyrus was an Iranian. The Greeks knew him as a half-Mede, half-Persian. The Old Testament authors, who had good knowledge of the different ethnic groups of the Near East, refer to Cyrus as the “King of Persia.” Darius I, who in his inscriptions proudly declared himself to be “a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan lineage,” never claimed to have founded an Iranian empire *de novo*.¹⁴ He instead emphasized the continuities between his own empire and that of Cyrus. “The empire that belonged to our family, that I restored,” states Darius in his

Bisutun Inscription. Further evidence of Cyrus' Iranian identity exists in the quasi-legendary accounts of his birth and childhood. These tales appear to have been modeled, in main, on traditional Iranian epics, known from the Avesta, Pahlavi religious texts, and Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Concepts intrinsic to Zoroastrianism, an Iranian religion, have also been adduced in the propaganda that Cyrus' advocates disseminated in Ionia and among the Jewish population of the Babylonian Empire. What we know about those close to Cyrus also reinforces the notion that he was an Iranian. His highest-ranking officers all carried Iranian names.** And he himself gave Iranian names to his children.

Were Cyrus anything but an Iranian, we should expect some reference to it in the sources. There is none.¹⁵ According to Herodotus, the Persians fondly remembered Cyrus as the "Father" of their nation, and the first century CE Latin author Quintus Curtius Rufus relates how at the Battle of Gaugamela the Persians were exhorted to bravery "by the eternal memory of Cyrus."¹⁶ Even Darius, whose Persian ancestry is beyond dispute, reportedly never dared compare himself to the empire's founder.¹⁷ This is not the reputation of an outsider.

§ The situation was different in Khuzestan where Elamitic languages continued to be spoken as late as the tenth century CE.

¶ A useful analogy may be drawn to the practice of modern Egyptian statesmen. In dealing with European and American states, these officials refer to their country as "Egypt," the hallowed name used in Western literature since Greek and Roman times. However, with respect to both their own people and Middle Eastern neighbors, they employ the term "Misr," which is of ancient Semitic origin and represents the standard native designation of country since the Arab conquest in the seventh century CE.

** One must treat the evidence of personal names cautiously, as, for example, two of the rebel kings of Elam named in the Bisutun Inscription had Iranian names. But notwithstanding the possible presence of Persianized Elamites in Cyrus' entourage, it is telling that none of his known officers carried a distinctly Elamite name.

Additional Thoughts on the Median Worship of Mithra

The view that Cyrus' conquest of Media paved the way for Zoroastrianism to supersede a religion centered upon the worship of Mithra is hardly a new one, though it cannot be termed mainstream.¹ This Appendix examines in detail the evidence for the establishment of a foreign-influenced Mithraic cult as the state religion of the Median Empire and considers broader historical trends related to the worship of Mithra during the Achaemenid period.

The Evidence for the Median Worship of Mithra

The Form Mithra's name

Perhaps the most basic indication of Mithra's prominence in the Median pantheon is linguistic. The god's name was rendered *Missa* in Old Persian and *Mithra* or *Mitra* in Median.² The almost unanimous use of the forms "Mithras" or "Mitra" in the classical sources demonstrates that knowledge of Mithra passed to the west through speakers of Median, as opposed to Old Persian, dialects and that the god was of greater importance to the former people.³ Consistent with this notion, the only known inscription in which an Achaemenid king invokes Mithra (and Mithra alone) for protection was commissioned by Artaxerxes II at Ecbatana.⁴ It seems plausible that this king, who came to power in the wake of a serious Median uprising, sought to appease the Medes by appealing to their most beloved god in a local inscription.⁵

The Legend of Deioces

Herodotus' legend of Deioces' rise to power is replete with Mithraic motifs of political leadership and sovereignty, even though the god's name is not explicitly mentioned.⁶ This tale represents a typical "founder legend," and stories of this sort generally provide insights into the religious beliefs of the nation founder and his heirs. A good example involves the quasi-legendary account of Darius I's accession. To portray his empire as the earthly counterpart of Ahuramazda's heavenly domain, Darius claimed to have seized power with the help of six nobles, when, in fact, seven or eight aristocrats offered critical assistance during his coup.⁷ By enumerating the involvement of only six nobles, however, Darius drew a parallel between himself and his followers, on the one hand, and Ahuramazda and the six Amesha Spentas, on the other.⁸

A latent theme in the legend of Deioces appears to be the protagonist's political ascent through the auspices of Mithra. Indeed, Deioces seems to be presented as an earthly personification of Mithra, as the following parallels to the *Mihr Yasht* demonstrate:

- Deioces: Starts out as the judge of a small village, then becomes the chief arbiter of several neighboring districts, and, finally, the master of a unified tribal kingdom.
- Mithra: Is presented as the chief "judge" (Avestan *ratu*) of a sequence of sociopolitical units – the house, clan, tribe, and country.⁹
- Deioces: Receives the kingship in a public assembly.
- Mithra: Stands tall as a "chief of assemblies."¹⁰
- Deioces: Uses deception to become a despot.
- Mithra: The "clever" god who manipulates events with "the dominion of an all-powerful tyrant."¹¹
- Deioces: Spies on his subjects through officials called his "Eyes" and "Ears."
- Mithra: Appears with "a thousand ears, well-shaped, with ten thousand eyes, high, with full knowledge, strong, sleepless, and ever awake."¹²
- Deioces: Rules from the inner confines of lofty Ecbatana.
- Mithra: Exercises dominion from the palace that Ahuramazda

builds him atop Mount Hara.¹³

- Deioces: Orders Ecbatana's construction.
- Mithra: Makes "houses large ... with well-laid foundations ... high above [their] groundwork ... and ... lofty."¹⁴

Mithra and Nisaya

Actual history tracks the legend in allowing for a particularly strong connection between Mithra and Median royalty. The original territory of Khshathrita, the first great political leader of the Medes and possibly an ancestor of Cyaxares and Astyages, was Kar-Kashshi, near the famous horse pastures of Nisaya. According to Strabo, fourth century BCE Persian kings annually received thousands of Nisayan foals as special gifts from their satraps during the Mithrakana (New Persian *Mehregan*), or "Festival of Mithra."¹⁵ This report points to Mithra as the principal god of Nisaya, as does the lore surrounding Mount Bisutun. New Persian *bi-sutun* means "without pillar(s)," a term connoting considerable height. But this term represents a corruption of the mountain's Old Iranian name **Bagastana*, or "Place of the God." The unnamed deity who lived there was not Ahuramazda, who encompassed the entire sky, but the horse-driving Mithra, whom Artaxerxes III refers to as *Mithra Baga* in an important inscription from Persepolis and whom the *Mihr Yasht* describes as lording over a mountain-palace.¹⁶

Mithra the Baga Par Excellence

Among the western Iranians, *baga* ("One Who Dispenses (Prosperity)") was the generic word for "god." The word rarely appears in the Avesta, which applies the term only in connection with three deities: Mithra, Ahuramazda, and the Moon. The ancient form of the toponym "Bisutun" demonstrates that the local population of Nisaya revered Mithra as the main *baga*, or god, of the pantheon. A similar situation existed in parts of Armenia, a land with close cultural and religious ties to Media. The sources mention a settlement named Bagayaric ("Village of the *Baga*"; present-day Pakeric), famous for its great shrine to Mithra, built by Tigranes II in the first century BCE (perhaps on the spot of an earlier temple). Here, too, Mithra was the chief god.

In the Old Persian agricultural calendar, which was probably devised during the period of Median hegemony (if not by the Medes themselves) and which represents a clear relic of the pre-Zoroastrian past, the name of the seventh month is *Bagayadish* (“The Month for Worshipping the *Baga*”). This was the month in which the Iranians celebrated the festival of Mithrakana, called *Bagakana* in Sogdian, at the time of the fall equinox. The implication is that this calendar, which was no doubt widely used throughout western Iran, originated among a people who recognized Mithra as the *baga par excellence*, and that these people regarded the term *baga*, when unqualified, as synonymous with “Mithra.”¹⁷

That Mithra was once the chief deity of western Iran, as well as of certain lands such as Sogdiana in the east, may explain, among other things, the great emphasis that the Old Persian inscriptions place on Ahuramazda’s status as the “chief of the gods” (*mathishta baganam*) and the “great god” (*baga vazraka*). According to Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin and Francois Vallat, this emphasis represents a reaction to the prior religious order, first supplanted in Persia and later in Media, in which Mithra was the most high *baga*.¹⁸

The Frontiers of the Iranian World in the Mihr Yasht

Finally, the *Mihr Yasht* contains an important reference to Mithra as the principal deity of a distinct geographic region. The pertinent verses declare that Mithra’s enemy has no hope of escape, “whether in the east by the Indus, or in the west by the river, or at the source of the Jaxartes, or here in the middle of this earth, wherever he be, Mithra seizes him, clasping him with his arms.”¹⁹ Ernst Herzfeld long ago argued that the ambiguous identity of the western frontier stems from a scribal error; its true name is Tigre, or Tigris.²⁰ According to Herzfeld, the verses describe the horizons of the Iranian world as they existed at a particular point in time. Assuming Herzfeld’s argument to be valid, these verses, or the originals upon which they were based, may be dated with uncanny precision to 612–590 BCE, because Iranian tribes did not settle along the Tigris before the fall of Nineveh and penetrated farther west shortly thereafter. The political entity that dominated the Iranian world during this period was the Median Empire, such that Mithra, presumably, was its chief deity.

Evidence for the Syncretic Identification of the Median Mithra with Shamash

The syncretic identification of Mithra with Shamash has been argued by various scholars, mainly on the basis of historical probability. The thinking goes that the early Iranians were simple nomads, who viewed the high level of civilization attained by the Babylonians and Assyrians with awe and were generally receptive to Mesopotamian religious influence. Mithra's gradual transformation into a solar deity in western Iran has been attributed, at least in part, to the influence of Shamash's cult.²¹ Mithra's Median devotees are suspected of having adopted for their god Mesopotamian icons particular to the cult of Shamash. One manifestation of this iconography may exist in the serpents said to exist on the shoulders of the legendary villain Azhi Dahaka, who seems to have had a Mithraic connection.²² Another example may involve the popular image of the winged solar disc, earlier the representation of Shamash as the "Sun of Eternity."²³ Darius I and his successors used this icon as the symbol of Ahuramazda; however, one might think that, during the Median period, the solar disc represented Mithra.

Indeed, it seems probable that, as part of their Zoroastrian religious program, the Achaemenids co-opted Mithra's attributes for Ahuramazda in order to exalt the latter deity; in this connection, the Bisutun monument offers what may be the most astonishing bit of evidence for the assimilation of Mithra and Shamash in Media. The main purpose of this monument was to commemorate the victory of Darius I over Gaumata the Magian. The usurper's political movement seems to have represented a backlash against the Zoroastrian leanings of the Achaemenid kings. It is therefore telling that, after the initial frieze had been carved and the surface surrounding the figures smoothened, Darius attached a solar emblem to Ahuramazda's crown. The gap-line where Darius' artisans inserted the new piece of masonry is still visible, and the solar emblem that was added matches that which appears atop Shamash's headdress in Mesopotamian art. According to Biruni, pre-Islamic Iranian kings celebrated the Mithrakana by adorning their crowns with an image of the sun and the wheel on which it rotates.²⁴ Because Ahuramazda is depicted with this solar emblem only at Bisutun, we may surmise that Darius either added the emblem to: (1) placate his Median subjects, who perhaps yearned to see the king invoke the protection of a solar god; or (2) to once and for all demonstrate to the Medes that Ahuramazda (and not Mithra) was the main Iranian god of the sun. Either scenario implies that, already by Darius' time, elements of Shamash's cult had

influenced the worship of Mithra in Media.²⁵



Bas-relief of Ahuramazda from Bisutun. Note the gap-line around the solar emblem atop his crown. Darius added this piece some time after the original carving had been completed.

A Babylonian-Influenced Median Mithraic Cult of the Planets

Further evidence for the integration of Babylonian solar worship into the Median state religion may be gleaned from Herodotus' tale of the construction of Ecbatana. According to Herodotus, Deioces fortified Ecbatana with seven concentric walls, each of which had battlements of a different color.²⁶ Proceeding from the outermost (lowest) wall to the innermost (highest) wall, the color scheme was as follows: white, black, red, blue, orange, silver, gold. Herodotus'

description is clearly fantastic. The more reliable Polybius clarifies that the palace complex at Ecbatana lacked even a single circuit wall, much less seven.²⁷ The motif of a multi-colored, seven-walled building or city has its origins in Babylonian religious concepts, which emphasized the worship of the sun, moon, and five planets visible to the naked eye (Mercury, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn). The Babylonians associated each heavenly body with a specific god and metal. The color scheme of the mythical walls of Deioces' citadel thus resembles that of the famous ziggurat of Borsippa, which was dedicated to the Babylonian god Nabu, deity of the planet Mercury. However, unlike Deioces' citadel, the ziggurat of Nabu did not allot the highest position to the sun, symbolized, as it was, by the color gold. This gradation of heavenly bodies and metals finds its closest parallel in Roman Mithraism (the origins of which some scholars have traced to ancient Media). In the Roman cult, the soul of the initiate was believed to pass through seven ascending metallic barriers, each under the tutelage of a planetary god, before arriving at an eighth threshold in its heavenly journey.²⁸

Planet worship was foreign to Zoroastrianism before the late Achaemenid period and did not form part of the old Indo-Iranian religion. There is even evidence to suggest that the early Iranians condemned the veneration of the planets and other heavenly bodies, such as comets, which did not appear to them to be fixed in the sky like stars.²⁹ The Iranian legendary tradition remembers various heroes *and* villains, including Azhi Dahaka, as having resided in wondrous palaces designed to mirror the cosmos.³⁰ The legend of Ecbatana's construction may, therefore, have spawned among individuals opposed to the Babylonian-influenced religious practices of the Median kings.



Roman statue of Mithra, in Iranian attire, killing the primordial bull. A dog and serpent rush to drink the bull's blood, while a scorpion attacks the bull's testicles as it ejaculates. Mithraists believed that the bull's death initiated the cycle of life and death and set the cosmos in motion.

Evidence for the Syncretic Identification of the Median Mithra with Nergal

The notion that Nergal's cult influenced Median religious beliefs is by no means novel. James Moulton raised the possibility in his formative work on early Zoroastrianism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the idea has been taken up in recent years by Adrian David Bivar and Martin Schwartz, albeit with some important disagreements regarding the interconnection with Mithraism.³¹

Median Exposure to the Cult of Nergal

The Medes first gained exposure to Nergal's cult during the Assyrian period. Sargon II founded a fortress named Kar-Nergal in the Median

district of Kishessim (present-day Najafehabad), the ruler of which was an ally of Khshathrita.³² It goes without saying that this fortress must have contained a temple dedicated to its patron deity. Bivar has speculated that the lengthy epoch of Assyrian rule contributed to the Median worship of Nergal by inculcating the Medes with a pessimistic outlook on religion; specifically, he has suggested that the trauma of Assyrian oppression conditioned the Medes to view the gods as destructive spirits who had to be propitiated, rather than as benevolent entities who helped mankind.³³

Nergal's Assimilation with Mithra

Nergal's assimilation with Mithra appears to have occurred indirectly. James Russell has suspected that Nergal came to be identified with the pagan god Yima (New Persian *Jam*, *Jamshid*), whom the Indo-Iranians worshipped as the king of the dead.³⁴ A number of scholars have argued that Yima was the twin brother or alter ego of Mithra in the old Indo-Iranian religion.³⁵ Bivar has proposed a different process of assimilation, whereby the Medes identified Nergal with a sinister aspect of Zurvan, the Iranian god of time.³⁶ The Persepolis Fortification Tablets seem to attest the worship of Zurvan as an important Median deity.³⁷ According to Bivar, Zurvan's negative quality arose from the view that time is the ultimate killer of all living things, and this belief facilitated his identification with Nergal.³⁸ The connection to Mithra lies in the further hypothesis that certain Medes viewed Zurvan as an emanation of their sun god. The association between time and the sun was deep-rooted in ancient Near Eastern religious thought, given that the daily procession of the sun represented the principal method of measuring time.³⁹

Nergal's Animal Avatars and Attributes

Nergal's principal animal avatars (lions, snakes, scorpions, ravens, and dogs) appear in the iconography of Roman Mithraism. We do not know whether this reflects a process of religious assimilation that occurred during the Median epoch or in later times. Indeed, Nergal may have had his own cultists within Media who intermingled with and influenced the religious beliefs of Mithraists only after both groups had taken their cults "underground" during the Achaemenid

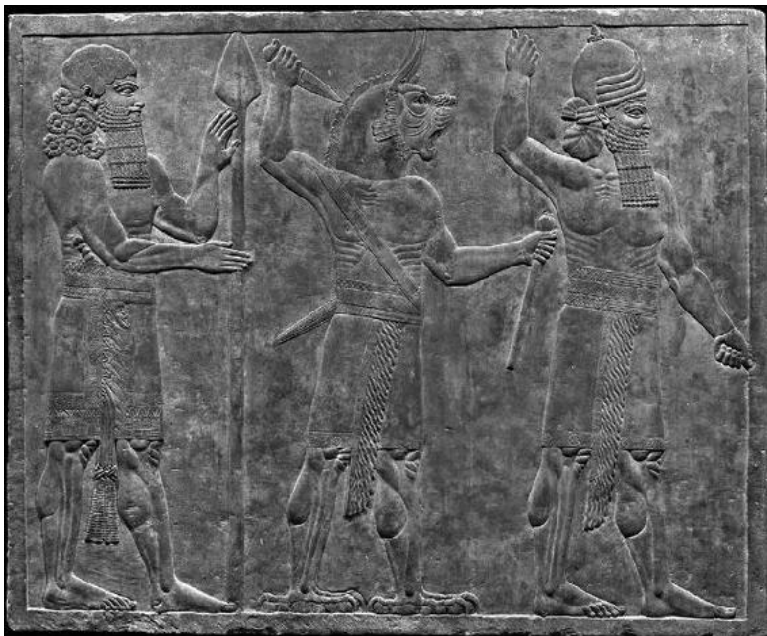
period.

Nevertheless, it is striking that statues of the so-called “Lion-Headed Figure,” which have been found at various Roman Mithraic sanctuaries, bear a strong resemblance to Assyrian representations of Nergal’s leonine acolytes. One such Assyrian figure appears at Pasargadae, where it functions to ward off evil spirits, like a gargoyle on a Gothic cathedral.[†] There is no immediate evidence for the adoption of this figure in Median art, as virtually nothing remains from this artistic genre. However, the little that has survived is largely indistinguishable from Assyrian art, and the discovery at Tepe Nush-e Jan of a figurine in the shape of the Assyrian demon Pazuzu suggests that the Medes had a penchant for depicting Assyrian apotropaic spirits. It thus seems entirely possible that the Medes were familiar with and employed Assyrian icons pertaining to Nergal in their art.

Accordingly, attention is due to that fact that the base of the statue of the Lion-Headed Figure in the York museum is inscribed with Angra Mainyu’s name. Indeed, the Latin dedication *Deio Areimanio* (“to the god Angra Mainyu”) appears on several Mithraic altars, and although it cannot be proved, the impression given is that Roman Mithraists viewed Angra Mainyu as a sinister and potentially deadly deity that had to be propitiated, but not one that was necessarily abhorrent. According to Bivar, this nuanced view of Angra Mainyu, which differed from the Zoroastrian perception of the evil spirit as a noxious devil unworthy of sacrifice, reflects the earlier Median attitude toward Zurvan, as his cult was influenced by Nergal. Specifically, Bivar has argued that the Lion-Headed Figure was originally known as Zurvan and came to be recognized as Angra Mainyu only due to Zoroastrian influence.



Lion-headed figure, with a snake wrapped around its body, from a Roman Mithraic sanctuary. It has been interpreted to represent Angra Mainyu.



Relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh

depicting the lion-headed demon and the so-called “smiting god.” Cyrus had the image of these two figures carved on the doorway to Palace S at Pasargadae. The lion-headed demon shown here is a servant of Nergal, the Mesopotamian god of death. Note the resemblance to the Roman Mithraic figure on the left.

The syncretic identification of Mithra with Nergal could explain, among other things, the Iranian belief, recounted by Herodotus, that leprosy was a punishment for those who sinned against the sun.⁴⁰ This passage indicates that certain western Iranians recognized Mithra, like Nergal, as a god of pestilence.⁴¹ It could further explain the striking resemblance between the Lion-Headed Figure of Roman Mithraism and the demon that the so-called “Royal Hero” battles on doorway friezes at Persepolis. The palace complex at Persepolis was constructed by Darius and Xerxes, who as explained below, seem to have opposed the Median cult of Mithra. According to Abolala Soudavar, the Persepolitan monster inspired subsequent depictions of Daivas in Iranian art.⁴²

The Cult Title *Khshathrapati*

Written in Greek, Lycian, and Aramaic, the trilingual Letoon inscription from Xanthus constitutes the main piece of evidence regarding the Median worship of Mithra under the cult title *Khshathrapati* (“Lord of Power,” “Lord of the Empire”). Inscribed in the fourth century BCE during the reign of Artaxerxes III, an ardent supporter of Mithra, the inscription contains dedications to various divinities worshipped by the local population of Xanthus. The name of the local solar god appears as Apollo in the Greek version of the text but as *Khshathrapati* in the Aramaic version. As the Greeks had identified Mithra with Apollo since Herodotus’ time, if not earlier, the inference is that the authors of the Letoon inscription understood *Khshathrapati* to be Mithra.⁴³ The link to the Medes rests in the fact that both *Khshathrapati* and the names of other Iranian divinities in the Aramaic version of the Letoon inscription appear in Median, as opposed to Old Persian, dialectic forms.⁴⁴ Broader historical considerations also favor a Median connection. The Persians conquered Lycia under the command of Cyrus’ trusty benefactor, Harpagus, the bulk of whose army likely consisted of soldiers drawn from his ancestral fiefdom in Media. This information is relevant because Harpagus’ campaign against Xanthus was a violent affair that

decimated the native population. According to Herodotus, Harpagus repopulated the area with expatriates from “other lands,” who, though not named, presumably included soldiers from his army.⁴⁵ Therefore, any expression of Iranian elements in the syncretic religion of Achaemenid Lycia should be deemed more likely to reflect Median, rather than Persian, influences.

The Alleged Iranian Practice of Human Sacrifice

Both David Bivar and Martin Schwartz have linked the worship of *Khshathrapati* to an Iranian rite of human sacrifice, influenced by the cult of Nergal. Herodotus mentions two specific instances in which the Iranians allegedly sacrificed humans, each time by inhumation. The first occurred during Xerxes I’s invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. Upon arriving at a place in Macedonia known as the “Nine Ways,” the Persian king allegedly sanctioned the sacrifice of nine native boys and girls to the “deity they call the god of the netherworld.”⁴⁶ Herodotus explicitly characterizes the burial of the native children as an offering, and Bivar has viewed the sacrifices at the Nine Ways as a concession to certain Median and Semitic constituents within Xerxes’ army that venerated Nergal or deities assimilated with Nergal.⁴⁷ According to Bivar, this rite stemmed from the notion that the victim’s death would divert the sinister deity’s lethal attention away from the community at large, a belief that made such sacrifices particularly common during periods of war.

However, George Rawlinson has interpreted the act as retribution for the defiance of the Macedonians, who twelve years earlier had inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Persians near the Nine Ways.⁴⁸ Rawlinson’s interpretation deserves serious consideration, for Herodotus elsewhere states that the Magi (the presumed officiants of the rite performed at the Nine Ways) refrained from sacrificing humans and the Persians are known to have punished or threatened to punish rebels by inflicting harm upon their children.⁴⁹ Herodotus himself recounts how Cambyses II once executed twelve high-ranking Persians on trumped up charges by burying them alive head first, and human planting of this sort is attested as a method of execution during the Sasanid period.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Justin records that Darius I once sent an embassy to the Carthaginians demanding that they abandon the practice of human sacrifice, as well as the burial of their dead and the eating of dog flesh.⁵¹ All three acts were deemed sacrilegious by Zoroastrians, and Justin’s testimony would seem to militate against the interpretation of the live burials at the Nine Ways as a sacrifice. In

this connection, it is important to note that various Greek authors on the Magi condemned Herodotus for misinterpreting or even concocting tales about the Magi's behavior during Xerxes' march.⁵²

The second instance of human sacrifice alleged by Herodotus involves Xerxes' wife, Amestris. Specifically, this queen is said to have buried alive fourteen sons of notable Persians as an offering to the same underworld god to postpone her own demise.⁵³ This act is more difficult to explain in terms of corporeal punishment. Schwartz has noted a possible connection between the seven pairs of children whom Amestris allegedly sacrificed and the seven stages of the Babylonian underworld.⁵⁴ However, we should remember that the Greeks despised Amestris, and Herodotus himself spins another tale that portrays her in a cruel and sadistic light.⁵⁵ So the story of her sacrificing young children may be a pure fabrication.⁵⁶ In his well-researched novel *Creation*, Gore Vidal explains the tale as arising from Amestris' disregard for Magian funerary customs, which prohibited the immediate burial of corpses.⁵⁷

Mary Boyce has viewed the alleged sacrifices at the Nine Ways and those that Amestris ordered as offerings to the pagan god Yima, the king of the dead, who, as mentioned, seems to have been closely affiliated with Mithra.⁵⁸ According to Boyce, the cult of this deity tended to revive during periods of personal and national stress.

That the line between corporeal punishment and religious offering was exceedingly thin is suggested by the testimony of Dio Chrysostom.⁵⁹ According to this author, the Persian emperors adopted a Mesopotamian custom – now known to have arisen from the cult of Nergal – pursuant to which they annually dressed up a condemned criminal as king and sat him upon the royal throne for several days. At the end of this term, they scourged the criminal and impaled him in accordance with the judgment entered against him. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that any misfortune fated for the king would, instead, befall on the known evil-doer. So the victims allegedly “sacrificed” by the western Iranians may have been condemned individuals whose souls were “consecrated” upon death to some sinister deity – that is, they were damned to Hell.⁶⁰ Such practice would accord with the cosmic aspects of ancient Iranian kingship, whereby the monarch's faithful were deemed to be allies of Truth, whereas his enemies were considered to be followers of the Lie. A similar obfuscation of secular and religious concepts may underlie the few recorded instances in which the Iranians, or foreign soldiers serving in Iranian armies, singled out captive enemy combatants for “sacrifice” in the immediate aftermath of battle.⁶¹ The Greeks, Phoenicians, and other ancient peoples are known to have similarly “offered up” military prisoners, so we may be dealing with a

The Desertion of Median Settlements

The notion that the Medes were more willing than the Achaemenids to engage in rites aimed at propitiating evil spirits may explain certain aspects of the mysterious ruins at Tepe Nush-e-Jan in the Malayer Plain near Ecbatana. This site contained several monumental buildings, including a central temple, columned hall, and a fort. One curious feature of Tepe Nush-e-Jan is the presence of a blind subterranean tunnel below the columned hall.⁶³ The purpose of this tunnel remains a mystery; but a ritualistic function cannot be ruled out.⁶⁴ It is tempting to draw a connection to a passage from Plutarch's *Of Isis and Osiris*, which provides that the adherents of a certain Iranian cult held Time (Zurvan) to be the only uncreated god, Ahuramazda to be all good, Angra Mainyu to be all bad, and Mithra to mediate between the two.⁶⁵ The same cultists practiced a rite, says Plutarch, in which they offered *haoma* mixed with the blood of a wolf to Angra Mainyu in dark and secluded places. The propitiation of Angra Mainyu was, of course, anathema to Zoroastrianism, but not inconsonant with Mithraic beliefs. Given the prominent roles ascribed to Time and Mithra, several scholars have identified the cult described by Plutarch as an uneven synthesis of Zoroastrianism and Median Mithraism.⁶⁶ Did the Medes use the tunnel at Tepe Nush-e-Jan for infernal offerings, along the lines of those described by Plutarch? According to Stuart Brown, the establishment of Persian rule may have prompted the desertion of other Median sites, including Godin Tepe, which also featured a blind tunnel.⁶⁷

Of course, much about Tepe Nush-e-Jan remains obscure, and its peaceful desertion may have occurred before the Persian conquest due to sociopolitical developments within Media. The factors most frequently cited in this regard have nothing to do with religion. Some scholars attribute the abandonment of Tepe Nush-e-Jan and other sites in northwestern Iran to the poor quality of Median rule, whereas other experts explain the phenomenon paradoxically in terms of the centralization of royal power at Ecbatana. In this connection, consideration is due to Herodotus' testimony that Deioces compelled the Median nobles to forsake their petty townships and live near his palace.⁶⁸ Even if one accepts that Tepe Nush-e-Jan was abandoned under such circumstances, however, much about the site suggests that its residents followed a different religion than the Achaemenid kings.⁶⁹ Aside from the blind tunnels mentioned above, one might cite

the mud-brick altar within the central temple. Unlike the altar that Cyrus erected at Pasargadae, the specimen at Tepe Nush-e Jan contains a shallow bowl, indicating that fires were kindled for only short periods of time, when offerings were made. By contrast, the deep bowl of the Pasargadae altar – a distinctively Zoroastrian feature – indicates a perpetually burning flame. The indoor location of the altar at Tepe Nush-e Jan represents another distinguishing characteristic. At least from the time of Cyrus until the second half of the fifth century BCE, the Achaemenid kings seem to have worshipped exclusively at outdoor altars.⁷⁰ This was in line with the precepts of both early Zoroastrianism and the original Indo-Iranian religion. By contrast, strong grounds exist for believing that, within the territories controlled by the Medes, Mithra's cultists began performing key rituals within temples.[†]

Mithra's Waning Fortunes under Darius and Xerxes

Gaumata's Veneration of Mithra

If we may accept Darius' account, Gaumata the Magian's usurpation of power in 522 BCE clearly had religious implications. Not only did the Magian destroy certain places of worship in the Iranian provinces, but he seems also to have been quite devoted to Mithra. This may be deduced from the establishment of his headquarters in the province of Nisaya, where Mithraic traditions waxed particularly strong, as well as by the Magian's celebration of the Mithrakana during the fall equinox. Indeed, Darius appears to have assassinated Gaumata during the Mithrakana."⁷¹

The Identification of Gaumata with Azhi Dahaka

Perhaps in recognition of Gaumata's Mithraic affinities, Darius' minstrels portrayed the overthrow of the Magian usurper in terms of the legendary struggle between the hero Thraetona and the villainous Azhi Dahaka. The minstrels either emphasized or invented the story of Gaumata taking two Achaemenid princesses – Atossa and Phaedime, formerly wives of Cambyse – into his harem. The purpose was to draw a connection to Azhi Dahaka, who, in the epics, makes

concubines out of Yima's two wives and/or daughters.⁷² By comparing Gaumata to Azhi Dahaka, Darius' minstrels followed the example of Cyrus, whose propagandists invoked the same myth to rally support for the Persian founder in his war against the Mithra-worshipping Astyages. Such propaganda apparently resulted in Azhi Dahaka coming to embody, among other things, the Median cult of Mithra in the ancient Persian epic tradition.⁷³

The Purge of the Magi

But Darius' enmity toward Median Mithraism went well beyond propaganda. The son of Hystaspes presided over a great massacre of Gaumata's Magian devotees.⁷⁴ The anniversary of this purge, known to the Greeks as the *Magophonia*, or "Killing of the Magi," constituted a red-letter day in the Persian calendar, during which the Magi were forbidden to show themselves in public. Indeed, Darius, whose branch of the Achaemenid family had no connection to the Medes, seems to have been particularly wary of Median attempts to revive the empire and national cult of the Median kings. Among the rebel leaders whom Darius defeated during the first year and a half of his reign, those who claimed descent from the Median royal house received the harshest treatment and were put to death with heavy torture.

Mithra in the Persepolis Archives

Given the circumstances, we should expect Darius to have withheld support for the cults of those Iranian deities popular among the Medes. Evidence for Darius' disapproval may exist in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. Although these Tablets mention the activity of the Magi, it is questionable whether they contain direct reference to Mithra's cult. The worship of Mithra may be alluded to in recorded offerings to the divine entity *Missa Baka*, which some scholars have construed as the Elamite form of Old Persian **Missa Baga* ("Mithra the Lord"). But this view has not gained general acceptance. Most scholars interpret *Missa Baka* as the Elamite rendering of Old Persian **Vitha Baga* ("Gods of the Royal House") or **Visa Baga* ("All the Gods"). The last term seems most preferable, because it has parallels in Vedic and Sasanid literature.⁷⁵

Also obscure is the reference in an unpublished Elamite tablet to

a certain “*She-u-tra-ba-ti-ish*, the Median god.” This divine name has been interpreted as either *Khshathrapati* or Shoithrapati. The former was an important Mithraic cult-epithet, the latter the name of the ancient Iranian god of the campground, a fitting deity for the tribal Medes.⁷⁶ Moreover, despite mentioning Darius’ presence in Fars during the autumn months, the Persepolis Fortification Tablets contain no firm reference to the celebration of a Mithraic festival around the time of the fall equinox.⁷⁷ In short, no direct evidence exists for Darius venerating Mithra or supporting his cult.⁷⁸ Furthermore, as stated above, the son of Hystaspes seems to have actually co-opted Mithra’s attributes for Ahuramazda, presumably in an effort to supplant the former deity.

Achaemenid Military Processions

This process appears to have continued under Xerxes, as demonstrated by the classical accounts of Achaemenid military parades. The Avesta dedicates several verses to describing Mithra’s wondrous chariot, and based on this and other evidence, we may deduce that the chariot constituted an important Mithraic icon. According to Herodotus, when Xerxes left Sardis to sack Athens in 480 BCE, his soldiers paraded a single empty chariot drawn by eight white horses that was said to be the vehicle of Zeus [Ahuramazda] and was “followed on foot by a charioteer holding the reins, for no human creature may mount upon the seat of the car.”⁷⁹ However, Xenophon provides that some eighty years later Persian armies contained multiple sacred chariots, one belonging to Ahuramazda and another to “the Sun,” which in this case can only mean Mithra. By this time, the Achaemenids viewed Mithra as the Wise Lord’s veritable equal and hailed him as such in their inscriptions. Conversely, under Xerxes, the worship of Ahuramazda reached its height, and no other god enjoyed commensurate status in the eyes of the king.

Xerxes’ Persecution of the Daivas

Mithra’s lack of royal support during Xerxes’ reign coincided with the heightened involvement of Persians, as opposed to Medes, in the imperial bureaucracy. Irrespective of whatever martial rites Xerxes may have condoned during his invasion of Greece, his own

inscriptions attest to an intensified aversion to the cults of deities opposed to Ahuramazda. In one particularly important text known as the Daiva inscription, Xerxes boasts of destroying a sanctuary where previously the Daivas were worshipped. In its place, the Persian king paid homage to Ahuramazda and the positive cosmic force of Arta (“Truth, Order”). The tenor of the inscription is thoroughly Zoroastrian, and although the text speaks of only one sanctuary, the main purpose was to signal the king’s active suppression of Daiva-worship within the core territories of Iran. One should therefore think that Xerxes’ persecutions resulted in larger numbers of Median Mithraists leaving their homeland for the remote regions of Iran, as well as for the frontier provinces of Asia Minor, the Levant, and Bactria. Some scholars have traced the origins of Roman Mithraism to the beliefs of those groups that relocated to Asia Minor and the Levant and assimilated their deities with various local gods to avoid persecution. According to these scholars, the “underground” nature of their religious practices persisted in Roman Mithraism, which was primarily a soldiers’ cult performed by secret societies in subterranean temples.

Mithra’s Revival under Xerxes’ Successors

The Religious Climate Under Artaxerxes I and Darius II

The worship of Mithra in Iran experienced an important resurgence during the reigns of Artaxerxes I and his descendants. The immediate stages of this revival may be attributed to the revolt of the king’s half-brother Hystaspes, the satrap of Bactria, who marched against the imperial capitals early in Artaxerxes’ reign. This rebellion presumably motivated Artaxerxes to consolidate his grasp over Persia and Media, a political initiative that may have entailed a relaxation of Xerxes’ hardline religious policies.

Perhaps more decisive was the heightened influence of the Magi, most of whom never fully abandoned their prior beliefs despite formally adopting Zoroastrianism as their religion. Any dispute between the Magi and the Zoroastrian priests of eastern Iran was put to rest when Artaxerxes accepted and endorsed the Magi’s claim to have been the founders of Zoroastrianism.⁸⁰ It is noteworthy that,

during this period, both groups seem to have recognized the merits (and political expediency) of developing the religion along pantheistic lines, whereby the cults of various deities could be squared with the worship of Ahuramazda.

Artaxerxes was also famous for marrying several princesses of Babylonian descent, and these marriages had the apparent effect of re-opening the channels for the syncretic assimilation of Iranian deities with Mesopotamian gods. Specifically, the inclusion of Babylonian princesses within the royal harem precipitated renewed efforts to identify Mithra with Shamash.

All these developments had the effect of raising Mithra's profile in Media and Persia, though the morbid rituals associated with the earlier Median state cult appear to have remained abjured. It was probably under Artaxerxes or his son Darius II that the *Mihr Yasht* was set in its final form.

The Religious Proclamations of Artaxerxes II

Still, Mithra does not seem to have received explicit mention in Achaemenid royal inscriptions before the reign of Artaxerxes II. We may assume that the circumstances of this homage were linked to the rebellion of Cyrus the Younger, though the fact that both of Artaxerxes' parents had Babylonian mothers also deserves mention. The viceroy of Asia Minor, Cyrus the Younger attempted to dethrone his brother in 401 BCE, and the seriousness of his revolt forced Artaxerxes to broaden his base of support in Iran. To this end, Artaxerxes placed great stock in reconciling the Medes, who as recently as 409 BCE had revolted against their Achaemenid overlords. Artaxerxes accordingly made Mithra and the goddess Anahita, whose cult seems to have been particularly strong in Media, Ahuramazda's junior partners as the chief deities of the Achaemenid state.⁸¹ The new divine triad paralleled the Babylonian trinity of Marduk, Shamash, and Ishtar and remained prominent in Persian Zoroastrianism through the Sasanid period. It is nevertheless indicative of the king's uneasy relationship with Mithra and Anahita that, in the earliest building inscriptions mentioning these deities, Artaxerxes begs them not to destroy his constructions; such fear of a deity's arbitrary power to inflict harm is not reflected in earlier royal inscriptions that invoke only Ahuramazda by name.⁸²

The Proliferation of Temples Named After Mithra

The reign of Artaxerxes II was also noteworthy from a religious standpoint due to the emphasis he placed upon constructing indoor temples for the worship of Zoroastrian deities. Whereas before his reign Zoroastrians customarily performed their religious rites in the open or in outdoor precincts demarcated by low-rising walls, Artaxerxes seems to have insisted upon the construction of enclosed temple structures of various types. In later Zoroastrian literature, the generic name for these buildings was *Dar-e Mehr*, or “Gate to Mithra.” This name would seem to attest the revival of a temple-based cult of Median origin, as the practice of designating a temple as a god’s “gate” started in Urartu.⁸³ The establishment of these temples seems to have corresponded with further efforts to organize the Magi into a hierarchical, ecclesiastical order.

Artaxerxes III

Artaxerxes II’s religious policies were generally continued by his son Ochus (Old Persian *Vahauka*, the “Good,” a retrenchment of Old Persian **Vahumanah*, Avestan *Vohumanah*), who adopted the throne-name Artaxerxes III. In his Persepolis inscription, Artaxerxes III beseeches Ahuramazda and Mithra to protect himself, his country, and his constructions.⁸⁴

The Evidence of the *Shahnameh*

The Achaemenid monarchs who took a harsh stance toward the Mithra-worshipping Magi are not explicitly named in the Iranian legends, as known from the Pahlavi religious texts and Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. By contrast, the memories of those Achaemenids who promoted the worship of Mithra and empowered his Magian devotees are preserved in the same literary corpus. There may be no coincidence in this, as the Magi became the principal caretakers of Iranian history during the post-Achaemenid period.

The first Achaemenid king to receive explicit mention in the legendary history was Artaxerxes I. The epics praise Ardashir (Artaxerxes) the *Deraz Dast* as a noble and virtuous king. Meaning “Long-Handed,” *Deraz Dast* was a genuine epithet of Artaxerxes I that

the Greek and Roman authors rendered as *Macrocheir* and *Longimanus*, respectively. The nickname was probably Mithraic, and the epics' artificial inclusion of Artaxerxes within the same Kayanid dynasty to which Kavi Vishtaspa belonged bespeaks the Achaemenid's reputation for piety in the eyes of the Magi.⁸⁵

Darius II, who continued his father's policies, appears in the legends as Darab the son of Ardashir. Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III are also present, although their identities have been merged with that of Ardashir the *Deraz Dast*.⁸⁶ Thus, according to the *Shahnameh* and other sources, Ardashir ruled under the sobriquet *Bahman* (the later form of **Vahumanah/Vohumanah*), which seems to reflect Artaxerxes III's birth-name, *Vahauka*.⁸⁷ The legends have Ardashir marry his own daughter Homay; this union recalls the incestuous marriages of Artaxerxes II, about which the Greek authors wrote.⁸⁸ Close-kin marriage constituted an important Magian custom.

Conclusion

As the foregoing demonstrates, this broader view of religious dynamics within the Achaemenid Empire is consistent with the notion that Cyrus' overthrow of Astyages had major ramifications in the realm of religion. The religious landscape of Iran was constantly changing during the Achaemenid period, and the vacillating fortunes of Mithra's cult seem to have been linked to the Persian kings' relations with the Medes and the Magi.

† See page 317.

‡ See pages 147, 468.

Cyrus and the Cult of the Goddess Anahita

Mithra's fortunes in Iran were intertwined with those of several other deities. The most important of these was Ardvi Sura Anahita, a goddess of disparate origin whose name meant the "Moist, Strong, Immaculate One." Among the gods of Iranian provenance whose attributes Anahita co-opted were Ashi (the chariot-riding goddess of truth) and two water deities, the goddess Harakhvati (after whom the land of Arachosia in southeastern Iran was named) and the god Apam Napat (the main Iranian equivalent of Varuna, Mithra's partner in the old Indo-Iranian religion). Anahita was the goddess of the heavenly waters, from which the Iranians believed all fresh water on earth flowed. She was also a deity of fertility and love, as well as of war.

The classical sources contain several references to Cyrus' veneration of Anahita, whom they varyingly identified with the Greek (and Roman) goddesses Artemis (Diana), Athena (Minerva), and Aphrodite (Venus). The Roman author Tacitus records that the inhabitants of Hieracome in Lydia dated the establishment of the cult of the "Persian Diana" in their town to "the reign of Cyrus."² According to Plutarch, Artaxerxes II received his investiture at Pasargadae, within the "sanctuary of a warlike goddess, whom one might conjecture to be Athena."³ It was in this sanctuary that, per Plutarch's testimony, each new Achaemenid king donned Cyrus' robes as part of the customary coronation ceremony. According to Strabo, Cyrus once attributed an important victory against the Sakas to the "goddess of his fathers," for which reason the conqueror allegedly constructed cult-centers dedicated to Anahita throughout his empire, including within the settlement of Zela in Cappadocia.⁴

The fundamental premise that Cyrus revered Anahita seems sound, although a number of scholars have challenged it based on the curious history of the goddess' cult. Anahita does not appear among

the deities named in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets or in Achaemenid royal inscriptions before the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–358 BCE). The testimony of Berossus confirms this king's strong devotion to the goddess, whose cult benefited greatly from his pantheistic religious policies. According to Berossus, Artaxerxes erected idols of "Aphrodite Anaitis" in Babylon, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Bactria, Damascus, and Sardis.⁵

A late Achaemenid cylinder seal impression offers a glimpse of what the cult-statues erected by Artaxerxes must have looked like. The imprint depicts Anahita as a royal lady, her crowned-head surrounded by a starburst, standing on the back of a lion, with a flower in one hand, and a *barsom*, or sacred bundle of twigs, in the other. This depiction bears a strong resemblance to the description of Anahita given in the *Aban Yasht*, the Young Avestan hymn dedicated to the goddess:

A maid, fair of body, most strong, tall-formed, high-girded, pure, nobly born of a glorious race, wearing along her body a mantle fully embroidered with gold, ever holding the barsom in her hands, according to the rules, wearing square golden earrings on her ears, and a golden necklace around her beautiful neck . . . and her waist girded tightly, so that her breasts may be well-shaped, that they may be tightly pressed . . . Upon her head a golden crown, with a hundred stars, with eight rays, a fine, well-made crown . . . with fillets streaming down.⁶

This passage and other evidence, including the Avestan form of the goddess' name, have been interpreted to suggest that the *Aban Yasht* was either redacted for the final time or composed in its entirety during the late-Achaemenid period, perhaps when Artaxerxes was king. The implication is that Anahita was a fringe deity before the reign of Artaxerxes and that the stories of Cyrus' devotion to her were spun by fourth-century BCE worshippers, who sought to legitimize the goddess' cult by seeking a high antiquity for its foundation. However, the dating of the Avestan texts is a vexed issue, and it is by no means clear that the *Aban Yasht* was composed after the advent of Achaemenid rule. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that Artaxerxes would have taken pains to promote the worship of a deity that had previously lacked a large following. Indeed, his elevation of Anahita coincided with his promotion of Mithra, and the royal inscriptions always mention Anahita together with the sun god. The implication is that the two deities traditionally formed a unit, so that Cyrus, too, might have worshipped the great goddess.

Herodotus offers several bits of information that seem to hint at Anahita's popularity during the reigns of Artaxerxes II's predecessors. The Father of History possibly had Anahita in mind in describing Xerxes I's lavish sacrifice of a thousand oxen to "Trojan Athena" in 480 BCE.⁷ The large-scale immolation of livestock was a prominent feature of Anahita's cult, and the *Aban Yasht* formulaically repeats how various legendary heroes venerated the goddess by offering her "a hundred stallions, a thousand oxen, and ten thousand lambs." As the goddess of the heavenly waters, Anahita may also have been the intended recipient of sacrifices performed by the Magi to save Xerxes' fleet from harmful storms during his Greek campaign (Herodotus identifies the deity to whom these offerings were made with the Greek sea nymph Thetis).⁸ It has been supposed that Xerxes permitted offerings to various pre-Zoroastrian deities during his expedition against Athens as a concession to the Median soldiers in his army.⁹

A more telling reference to Anahita occurs in Herodotus' general summary of Iranian religious practices. According to this summary, the Iranians adopted the worship of "Celestial Aphrodite" at a relatively late date from the Mesopotamians and Arabs, who referred to the goddess as Mylitta and Alitta, respectively.¹⁰ "Mylitta" reflects Akkadian *Belit*, the "Lady," a well-known epithet of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of the planet Venus. Ishtar's cult clearly influenced the Iranian worship of Anahita. Not only did the idols built by Artaxerxes II (who was himself of part-Babylonian descent) resemble Mesopotamian portrayals of Ishtar but Anahita's dual role as the goddess of love and war is best explained by the morning and evening appearances of the planet Venus. As the so-called "morning star," Venus signified the call to battle and, as the "evening star," it embodied the feminine attributes of love and romance.¹¹ The reverence of the planets formed an integral part of the Median state religion (see Appendix III), which centered upon the worship of Mithra in his capacity as the god of the sun. Herodotus' mistaken belief that the Iranians referred to "Celestial Aphrodite" as Mithra confirms the sun god's strong association with Anahita, who must have played an important role in the Median pantheon and whose cult was on the upswing beginning in the middle decades of the fifth century BCE.¹²



Seventh century CE sculpture of the goddess Anahita from Taq-e Bostan at the base of Mount Bisutun. The water being poured from the ewer symbolizes Anahita's function as an aquatic goddess who also brings fertility.

Two additional details point to Anahita's popularity among the Medes. The first involves a passage from the *Aban Yasht* that mentions Anahita wearing a beaver-skin coat. Beavers, though not native to eastern Iran or the rivers and streams between the Caspian and Aral Seas, are plentiful in the Caucasus region. The implication is that the Avestan priests who composed the *Aban Yasht* learned about some of the goddess' attributes from the inhabitants of the northwestern corner of the Iranian plateau.¹³ The second piece of evidence concerns Anahita's link to the steppe nomads. Strabo mentions the celebration of a festival called the "Sacaean" at cult-centers dedicated to the goddess. At least according to popular etymology, the name "Sacaean" was derived from the ethnonym of the Sakas, and Anahita's temple at Estakhr in Fars (which flourished for some thousand years after its founding in the late fifth century BCE) was famous as a trophy room, where later Persian kings proudly displayed the decapitated heads and flayed hides of their enemies.¹⁴ Herodotus characterizes the collection of such macabre trophies as a Scythian custom, and the Scythians and

Sakas contributed greatly to the formation of the Median Empire.¹⁵

That Cyrus viewed Anahita as a fundamentally Median deity militates against the existence, in his day, of a sanctuary dedicated to this goddess within the Persian homeland at Pasargadae (the shrine mentioned by Plutarch was presumably built later, perhaps during the reign of Darius II).¹⁶ On the other hand, just as Cyrus' Median connections seem to have motivated his worship of Mithra and attuned him to the political expediency of placating the Medes, so, too, is he likely to have venerated Anahita. One can therefore accept his reported consecration of sanctuaries to Anahita in Asia Minor, as mentioned by the classical authors.¹⁷ By the same token, the absence of her name in the Persepolis archives and the goddess' redemption during the reigns of the later Achaemenids may be explained by Darius' zealous Zoroastrianism and religious opposition to Median paganism.¹⁸



A late-Achaemenid seal engraving depicting a king or noble praying to Anahita, who appears standing atop a lion surrounded by rays of light. The scene demonstrates the influence of the iconography of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war.

Ugbaru, Oebaras, Gobryas, and the Land of Gutium

In this book, I have identified Ugbaru, mentioned in the Babylonian Chronicle as the first Persian commander to enter Babylon, with Oebaras, Cyrus' main helper in Ctesias' *Persica*. This identification is uncommon and, to my knowledge, has only been made by Igor Diakonoff.¹ Most historians identify Ugbaru with the Gobryas of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.² This more usual identification is based on three considerations:

- The Babylonian Chronicle describes Ugbaru as the satrap of Gutium, thus recalling Xenophon's claim that Gobryas was the governor of a Babylonian province that went over to Cyrus.
- Ugbaru's name resembles that of Gobryas.
- The Babylonian Chronicle presents Ugbaru as the commander of the Persian column that occupied Babylon, thereby bringing to mind Xenophon's assertion that Gobryas led the Persian detachment that infiltrated the city's defenses.

However, there is no compelling proof for this identification, in view of the following:

- There is no evidence to suggest the existence of a Babylonian province called Gutium during the sixth century BCE.
- Although the name "Gobryas" is amply attested in Babylonian documents of the Achaemenid period, it is never rendered as "Ugbaru" elsewhere.
- Xenophon's mention of Gobryas as the Persian commander who seized Babylon should not be taken too literally, given that Gobryas' role is known to have been embellished in other respects.

What follows in this appendix is an elaboration upon these points, which will demonstrate that Ugbaru and Gobryas were two separate individuals and that the Babylonian Chronicle confirms the historicity of Oebaras. This, in turn, lends some credence to Ctesias' account of Cyrus' conquests, particularly the war against the Medes, in which Oebaras played an important part.

The Province of Gutium in the Babylonian Chronicle and Inscriptions of Cyrus

To support the identification of Ugbaru with Gobryas, a number of scholars have proposed the existence of a Babylonian province called Gutium, the governor of which defected to Cyrus while the latter was hostile to Nabonidus. Most of these scholars have located this province in the present-day district of Suleimaniyeh in Iraqi Kurdistan, whence Cyrus' main forces descended upon Babylon in 539 BCE. However, no evidence exists for a sixth century BCE, Babylonian province by the name of Gutium.

First attested in the third millennium BCE, the name "Gutium" had a lengthy history in Mesopotamian literature, in which it generally denoted the wild mountainous country east of Babylonia. Assyrian scribes of the seventh century BCE used the term to designate Media and, perhaps, other locations on the Iranian plateau. The Babylonian Chronicle mentions Gutium as Ugbaru's province and refers to Gutian soldiers under the latter's control. Aside from the Babylonian Chronicle, only three other sixth century BCE references to the land or inhabitants of Gutium exist in the sources; as explained below, none of the three suggests that Gutium was a Babylonian province.

The first and earliest reference occurs in an inscription of Nabonidus from Sippar: "As for [the god] Anunitum, who dwells at [Sippar], whose dwelling [Sennacherib] had previously removed to Arrapha, and whose cult the Gutians had destroyed" The Gutians here could conceivably be the Medes, for another one of Nabonidus' inscriptions mentions Nabopolassar's remorse at the destruction by Cyaxares of sanctuaries belonging to Mesopotamian gods; however, Paul-Alain Beaulieu has stated that, in this inscription, the Gutians represent the "archetypal barbarians and enemies of Babylonia."³ What is clear is that we are not dealing with the inhabitants of a territory under Babylonian control.

The second reference occurs in the Cyrus Cylinder, which, in recounting Cyrus' early victories, declares: "[Marduk] made the land

of Gutium and all the Umman Manda bow in submission at his [Cyrus'] feet." This reference seems inappropriate for a small frontier province in northern Mesopotamia, which, if we are to believe the relevant authorities, went over to Cyrus voluntarily. The allusion is to a forced submission or conquest. The most reasonable reading, therefore, is that Gutium here represents the land of Media and that the Umman Manda are the mixed hordes of Medes and Scythians that inhabited it; such an interpretation would accord with seventh century BCE Assyrian usages of the terms "Gutium" and "Umman Manda."

The third and final reference also occurs in the Cyrus Cylinder and describes Cyrus' restoration of the cult icons that Nabonidus removed to Babylon before the advance of the Persian army in 539 BCE. The text describes the extent of the region from which the icons had been taken as ranging from "Shuanna [Babylon] to Ashur and from [Susa](#), Akkad, Eshnunna, Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der, as far as the region of Gutium." According to Ran Zadok, this passage indicates that, on the eve of Cyrus' final campaign against Nabonidus, Babylonian territory extended eastward as far as the boundaries of Gutium.⁴ This conclusion makes sense. However, Zadok's further claim that the passage demonstrates the defection of a Babylonian province before the final Persian offensive is entirely unwarranted. The passage actually favors the identification of Gutium with Media, for the Achaemenid satrapy of Media is known to have extended as far west as the Tigris River – specifically between the Diyala River and the Bitlish Chai.⁵ In this connection, special attention is due to the testimony of Berossus, who based his history on Babylonian records and clearly equated the Gutians with the Medes.⁶

There is thus no compelling reason to think that the Babylonian Empire contained a province called Gutium, which went over to Cyrus before the final offensive against Nabonidus. Furthermore, strong indications exist that the authors of the Babylonian Chronicle and Cyrus Cylinder understood Gutium to denote the land of Media. The appropriate inference is that Ugbaru was the satrap of an Iranian province.

The Name "Ugbaru" as a Rendering of Oebaras, not Gobryas

It is oft-stated that the scribes who drafted the Babylonian Chronicle and the underlying documents on which it was based rendered the name "Gobryas" (Old Persian *Gaubaruva*) as *Ugbaru*. However, this notion is unlikely, for the same text mentions a separate Iranian

officer whose name is very clearly Gobryas, rendered *Gubaru* in Akkadian. The presence of both names – *Ugbaru* and *Gubaru* – within the Babylonian Chronicle militates against their equivalence.

Other evidence supports this notion. Although Akkadian renderings of Old Persian *Gaubaruvā* occur in numerous other inscriptions, quite significantly, none of these texts ever transmits the name as *Ugbaru* (*Gubaru* and *Gubarra* are the most common renderings).⁷ On the other hand, one can point to a basis for *Ugbaru* as a faithful rendering of Oebaras' name. Greek "Oebaras" most likely reflects Old Persian **Hubara*, meaning "Bearer of the Good," "Evangelist."⁸ As demonstrated by Ilya Gershevitch, scribes transliterating Iranian names into Elamite during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE occasionally rendered as *uk-* or *u-ik-*, the initial Iranian element *hu-*, "good," when the latter was followed by a second element beginning with the sound *-ba-* or *-pa-*. Examples would include *Uk-ba-ma* for Iranian **Hubama* ("Having Good Luster"), *Uk-pu-un-da* for Iranian *Hupavant* ("Protecting Well"), and *Uk-pish* for Iranian **Hubish* ("Healing Well").⁹ The scribes who drafted the Babylonian Chronicle may, therefore, have transcribed Oebaras' name as *Ugbaru* due to their reliance upon source documents that were composed in Elamite or otherwise derived from Elamite records. This is not improbable, given that Elamite was the main chancellery language of early imperial Persia.

Gobryas' Involvement in the Persian Conquest of Babylonia

So far, we have shown that the Babylonian Chronicle's reference to "Ugbaru, governor of Gutium," more likely pertains to Ctesias' Oebaras, in his capacity as the satrap of Media. Given the improbability that multiple individuals with the same name played a pivotal role in the Persian conquest of Babylonia, one implication of this showing is that Xenophon's Gobryas should be identified with the Gubaru of the Babylonian Chronicle.¹⁰ The Chronicle very clearly describes this Gubaru as the satrap of Babylonia in the immediate aftermath of Cyrus' conquest, and Lisbeth Fried has persuasively argued that he was the same individual as the Gubaru whose satrapal authority is invoked in Mesopotamian documents for the years 535–523 BCE.¹¹ That this Gubaru had a son called Nabugu (Akkadian *nabu* signifies "prophet" and is the basis of the name of Nabu, the Babylonian god of the planet Mercury) accords with Xenophon's assertion that Gobryas was of Babylonian descent, and one might

think that, in accordance with age-old Mesopotamian custom, the satrap assumed the Iranian name *Gaubaruva* only after switching his allegiance to Cyrus.¹²

One minor objection to this identification of the characters in the Babylonian Chronicle involves the Chronicle's silence on Gubaru's involvement in the actual military takeover of Babylon. In the *Cyropaedia*, Gobryas leads the Persian column that captures the city.¹³ The same role is played by Ugbaru in the Babylonian Chronicle, whereas Gubaru's name first appears only after the recorded entry of Cyrus and the main body of Persian troops. But this does not mean that Gubaru arrived on the scene late. He could just as easily have served as the main guide and second-in-command of Ugbaru's column, such that later generations remembered him as the leader. In any event, it should not surprise us if the popular accounts of the Persian conquest of Babylonia embellished the traitor's role. Indeed, some embellishment is already discernible in the *Cyropaedia*'s claim that Gobryas defected to Cyrus due to the murder of his son and that his entry into Babylon occurred during a daring night raid.

The Location of Gobryas' Province

There is little evidence on which to base an educated guess as to the location of Gobryas' province, though it makes sense to place it somewhere along the eastern marches of the Babylonian Empire. According to Walther Hinz, Gobryas governed a region in the Assyrian heartland.¹⁴ Previously, Vincent Scheil had argued that Gobryas was the Babylonian governor of Susa.¹⁵ Scheil based his theory, in part, on the assumption that Gobryas was an excellent general of Nabuchadnezzar. However, the text upon which Scheil relied to make this assumption has been shown to date to the reign of Cyrus and to have no bearing on Nabuchadnezzar's affairs.

Still, one should not discount the notion that Gobryas was originally a Babylonian official or ally in lowland Elam. Not only does the Babylonian Chronicle contain a possible allusion to disturbances in Elam in 546–545 BCE, but the Elamite lowlands were an important transitional zone between the civilizations of Iran and Mesopotamia throughout the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. Wouter Henkelman has speculated about the possible presence near Susa of a Chaldean or Aramaean tribe known as the Zari.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Susa Acropolis Tablets, which were drafted around 600 BCE, demonstrate the gradual influx of individuals bearing Iranian names. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that many people of mixed Persian and

Babylonian descent lived in this region. Such ethnic mixture could account for the fact that Gobryas carried an Iranian name, whereas his son's name was Babylonian. It could also explain the early interest that Gobryas took in the affairs of Cyrus, to whom he wisely transferred his allegiance several years before the Persians conquered Babylonia.

Conclusion

The common identification of Ugbaru with Gobryas lacks substantiation. Ugbaru was, in all likelihood, the Oebaras of Ctesias' *Persica*, whereas Gobryas must have been the Gubaru, who assumed responsibility for the administration of Babylonia immediately after the Persian conquest. The need to distinguish between Gobryas and Ugbaru becomes further apparent once we consider the history behind the conflation of the two characters. This conflation arose from the erroneous view that *Ugbaru* and *Gubaru* represented alternate Akkadian renderings of Old Persian *Gaubaruva*. Handicapped by a cursory understanding of the ancient languages and poor collations of the Babylonian Chronicle, early scholars read the text to state that Ugbaru and Gubaru were the same person and that Belshazzar perished in the immediate aftermath of Babylon's fall. Thus, in his masterful work on the history of the Persian Empire, Albert Olmstead maintained that Ugbaru had a lengthy career as the Persian satrap of Babylon.¹⁷ We now know that Ugbaru perished only days after the Persians occupied Babylon and that the Chronicle contains no reference to Belshazzar's death. The commonly expressed view that Ugbaru was identical to Gobryas represents a relic of the older, erroneous reading of the Chronicle and, in my opinion, should be abandoned.

The Babylonian Chronicle

The Babylonian Chronicle is one of the most important sources concerning Cyrus. It contains a terse yet objective account of the reign of Nabonidus, as well as the first year of Cyrus' rule in Babylonia. The date when the extant copy of the chronicle was composed remains uncertain. Various scholars have dated the text to the reign of Darius I or Artaxerxes II.¹ Others have argued for a date of composition during the Seleucid period. Whatever the case, the scribes who authored the Chronicle clearly drew upon authentic records from the reigns of Nabonidus and Cyrus. As such, the Chronicle provides invaluable information on Cyrus' campaigns in western Iran and Mesopotamia. The following translation represents an adaptation of the readings given by Jean-Jacques Glassner with revisions based on other readings of the text.² Within the text, "Akkad" is a synonym for Babylonia.

The Chronicle Inscription

The first year [556–555 BCE]: Nabonidus, the king [*lacuna*] lifted [*lacuna*]. The king [*lacuna*] of their country [whom] he brought to Babylon. [*Lacuna*] they trembled, and he did not lift [*lacuna*] their family, as many as there were [*lacuna*]. The king mustered his army and [marched] on Hume [*lacuna*].

[The second year [555–554 BCE]]: In the month of Tebetu [December–January], it was cold at Hamath [*lacuna*].

[The third year [554–553 BCE]]: In the month of Abu [July–August], [he marched] on the Ammananum [and] the orchards, fruits as many as there were, [*lacuna*] among them, [he brought] into Babylon. [*Lacuna*]. The king became ill but

recovered. In the month of Kislimu [November–December], the king [mustered] his army [*lacuna*] and to Nabu-tattan-usur [*lacuna*] of Amurru [*lacuna*] they set up their quarters [facing] Edom [*lacuna*] and the numerous troops [*lacuna*] gateway of Shintini [*lacuna*] he killed him [*lacuna*] the troops [*lacuna*].³

[The sixth year [550–549 BCE]: Astyages] mustered [his army] and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan, for [the] conquest [*lacuna*].⁴ The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner. They handed him over to Cyrus [*lacuna*] Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods, property [*lacuna*] which he carried off as booty [from] Ecbatana he took to Anshan.⁵ The goods [and] property of the army of [*lacuna*]. ⁶

The seventh year [549–548 BCE]: The king remained in Tema. The prince, the officers, and the army were in Akkad. In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king did not go to Babylon. Nabu did not go to Babylon. Bel did not go out. The Akitu was not celebrated. The sacrifices to the gods of Babylon and Borsippa were offered in Esagila and Ezida as [in normal times]. The [high] priest made a libation and inspected the temple.

The eighth year [548–547 BCE]: [Blank].⁷

The ninth year [547–546 BCE]: The king remained in Tema. The prince, the officers, and the army were in Akkad. In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king did not go to Babylon. Nabu did not go to Babylon. Bel did not go out. The Akitu was not celebrated. The sacrifices to the gods of Babylon and Borsippa were offered in Esagila and Ezida as in normal times. In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king's mother died at the military camp on the bank of the Euphrates, upstream from Sippar. The prince and his troops mourned for three days, and there was weeping. In the month of Simanu [May–June], a lamentation was set up in Akkad for the king's mother. In the month of Nisannu, Cyrus, King of Parsu, mustered his troops and crossed the Tigris below Arbela. In the month of Ajaru [April–May], he [marched] against the land of [*lacuna*], killed [or defeated] its king, took away his possessions, and stationed his own garrison there [*lacuna*].⁸ Thereafter, the king [Cyrus] and his garrison remained there. ⁹

The tenth year [546–545 BCE]: The king remained in Tema. The prince, the officers, and the army were in Akkad. In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king did not go to Babylon. Nabu did not go to Babylon. Bel did not go out. The Akitu was not celebrated. The sacrifices to the gods of Babylon and Borsippa were [offered] in Esagila and Ezida as in [normal] times. In the month of Simanu [May–June], on the twenty-first day [*lacuna*] of the country Elammiya, in Akkad [*lacuna*] the provincial governor at Uruk.¹⁰

The eleventh year [545–544 BCE]: The king remained in Tema. The prince, the officers, and the army were in Akkad. [In the month of Nisannu [March–April], the king did not go to Babylon. Nabu] did not go to Babylon. Bel did not go out. The Akitu was not celebrated. The [sacrifices to the gods of Babylon] and [Borsippa] were offered in Esagila and Ezida as in [normal times]. [*Lacuna*].

[*Lacuna*, containing the entries for years twelve through fifteen].

[The sixteenth year [540–539 BCE]: *Lacuna*] killed [or defeated]. The river [*lacuna*] Ishtar [of] Uruk [*lacuna*] army [or perhaps armies] of Persia.¹¹

The seventeenth year [539–538 BCE]: In the month of Nisannu [March–April], Nabu [went] from Borsippa to the procession of [Bel. Bel went out. In the] month of Tabitu [December–January], the king entered the Etur-kalama temple. In the temple [*lacuna*] he offered a wine libation [*lacuna*]. Bel went out. The Akitu was celebrated as in normal times. In the month of [Abu [July–August], Lugal-Marada and the gods] of Marad, Zababa, and the gods of Kish, Ninlil and the gods of Hursag-kalama entered Babylon. Until the end of the month of Ululu [August–September], the gods of Akkad [*lacuna*], upstream and downstream from Isin, entered Babylon. The gods of Borsippa, Cutha, and Sippar did not enter.¹² In the month of Tashritu [September–October], when Cyrus did battle at Opis against the army of Akkad, the Akkadians retreated. He [Cyrus] took plunder and defeated the soldiers of Akkad.¹³ On the fourteenth day, Sippar was taken without a struggle. Nabonidus fled. On the sixteenth day, Ugbaru, governor of Gutium, and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle. Later, having returned, Nabonidus was taken [prisoner] in Babylon. Until the end of

the month, the shield-carrying troops of Gutium surrounded the gates of Esagila, but there was no interruption of rites of any kind in the Esagila or in any other temple, and no festival date was missed. In the month of Arahsamnu [October–November], on the third day, Cyrus entered Babylon. Anointing vessels were filled up before him.¹⁴ Peace was imposed on the city.¹⁵ The proclamation of Cyrus was read to all of Babylon.¹⁶ Gubaru, his governor, installed sub-governors in Babylon.¹⁷ From the month of Kislimu [November–December] to the month of Addaru [February–March], the gods of Akkad, which Nabonidus had made come down to Babylon, were returned to their sacred cities. In the month of Arahsamnu, on the night of the eleventh day, Ugbaru died. In the month of [lacuna], the [king's] wife died. From the twenty-seventh day of Addaru till the third day of Nisannu, there was an official mourning period in Akkad. All the people went around with their hair disheveled.¹⁸ On the fourth day, as Cambyses, son of [Cyrus], went to the Egidri-kalama-sumu, [on his arrival], the one in charge of the Egidri [shrine] of Nabu who [lacuna] the scepter, [did not let him take] the hand of Nabu [because] of his Elamite dress. [Spears] and [quivers] [lacuna]. For the corvée, the prince [lacuna] Nabu to the Esagila [lacuna] before Bel and the son of Bel [lacuna]. Babylon [lacuna] the waters [lacuna] darkened [lacuna] the gate was demolished. The Eanna of [lacuna] he left the [lacuna] in Babylon [lacuna] he planned [lacuna] Babylon and [lacuna].

The Cyrus Cylinder

The Cyrus Cylinder is a modest four by eight-inch barrel-shaped piece of clay with an Akkadian inscription of forty-five lines. The text was probably commissioned within a few months of Cyrus' entry into Babylon in October 539 BCE. The first thirty-five lines of the inscription appear on the main body of the cylinder, which Hormuzd Rassam, an archaeologist affiliated with the British Museum in London, discovered beneath the ruins of the famous Imgur-Enlil wall in Babylon in 1879. In 1970, Paul-Richard Berger identified a smaller fragment containing lines thirty-six through forty-five among the Babylonian collection at Yale University. Both the main body of the cylinder and this smaller fragment are now in the possession of the British Museum.

The Historical Significance of the Cyrus Cylinder

The historical significance of the Cyrus Cylinder has been the focus of scholarly research for many years. From a strictly literary standpoint, the document represents the earliest known royal declaration of the Achaemenid period and appears to establish the basic format of subsequent inscriptions.¹ These usually commence with a brief description of the king's investiture by the chief god (in the Old Persian inscriptions, Ahuramazda), followed by a proclamation of the king's titles, and an account of his deeds, narrated in the first person. This basic outline, which has antecedents in earlier Babylonian and Assyrian monumental texts, may be discerned in the Cylinder inscription. The Cyrus Cylinder thus bridges the literary gap between later Achaemenid inscriptions, on the one hand, and the earlier proclamations of Mesopotamian royalty, on the other.

More interesting and contentious is the question of whether the

Cyrus Cylinder articulates any principles of Persian rule that may be taken as evidence that the Achaemenids were more tolerant than previous Near Eastern regimes. During the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, several Iranian and foreign propagandists and scholars hailed the Cyrus Cylinder as an ancient charter of human rights. This characterization came under immediate scrutiny from other scholars, who analyzed the inscription in terms of earlier Mesopotamian “building texts.” According to these scholars, the Cyrus Cylinder belongs to a specific literary genre employed by previous Mesopotamian kings who attained power in Babylonia following political upheavals and needed to legitimize their rule.² Written for the gods and for posterity, texts of the type were often inaccessible to the public; rather, they were inscribed on cylinders or prisms that the Babylonians ceremonially interred in the foundations of temples and other important buildings built or repaired by the new monarch.³ The basic elements of this “legitimation” genre involved a narration of: (1) the villainous nature of the previous regime; (2) the gods’ bestowal of the Babylonian kingship upon the new claimant to the throne; (3) the joyous greetings offered by Babylon’s inhabitants to the new claimant; (4) the new claimant’s pious dedications to local temples; and often (5) references to the building activities of earlier kings.⁴ The presence of all these elements within the Cyrus Cylinder demonstrates that the inscription served mainly to justify the Persian conqueror’s rule over Babylon and that it did not function as a charter guaranteeing the rights of peoples within the Achaemenid Empire.

But this does not mean that Cyrus never intended for his edict to communicate broader messages about Persian imperial policy. Because the Cylinder inscription was probably drafted before the Persians had developed an indigenous tradition of monumental literature, Cyrus must have relied heavily upon the literary expertise of his Babylonian subjects in composing the text. In particular, he would have sought guidance from Marduk’s priests, who would have informed Cyrus about the representations made by similarly situated sovereigns in the past, as well as the types of claims most likely to resonate with the social elites whose support the Persian conqueror sought.⁵ The priests would have modeled Cyrus’ inscription after previous legitimation texts, going so far as to replicate exact words and clauses. This was in line with Mesopotamian scribal traditions, which did not value literary innovation, and employed old-fashioned language and grammar to give edicts a more august tone.

Minor nuances and deviations between the text of the Cyrus Cylinder and its literary antecedents seem to suggest that the process was collaborative, however, and that Cyrus may have had the opportunity to infuse the text with information that he himself

deemed noteworthy. These nuances and deviations become significant for purposes of comprehending the Cyrus Cylinder's meaning, as does the more basic understanding that the Persian conqueror, who had no prior familiarity with the literary genre selected for his inscription, may have viewed the document through an Iranian, rather than a Mesopotamian, lens.⁶

This last point demands inquiry into the particular function of royal inscriptions in ancient Iranian society. Although the phraseology of the Old Persian texts parallels that of earlier Mesopotamian and Urartian compositions, their overall tenor is unique.⁷ The Old Persian inscriptions are narrative texts that function “first and foremost [as] ideological assertions.”⁸ To the extent they describe specific occurrences, they do so, not to record history, but to impart the lessons that one might derive from them. So, if an inscription mentions the suppression of a particular revolt, the main aim is not to memorialize a historical event, but to convey the broader message that the king shall maintain order in his realm.⁹ The language of the inscriptions is thus pared down and lacking in details that one might find in comparable Mesopotamian texts. These qualities make the Old Persian inscriptions painfully generic, but they also point to a culture that had a very particular view regarding the merits of narrative history. Because Cyrus belonged to that culture, it seems reasonable to assume that he regarded his Cylinder inscription in the same light – that is, as a didactic articulation of imperial policy.

Recent finds support this notion. In December 2009 and January 2010, scholars at the British Museum identified two fragments of a clay inscription recovered from the site of Dailem outside Babylon as belonging to an ancient copy of the Cyrus Cylinder.¹⁰ Prepared by a scribe named Qishti-Marduk, the fragments came from a conventional, flat tablet and not a cylinder of the sort commonly placed in foundation deposits. The implication is that Cyrus intended for the text of his Cylinder inscription to be distributed broadly, in different formats, and not merely buried in a single location, like a typical building text.¹¹ It is even conceivable that he arranged to have the Cylinder inscription read aloud during public gatherings and court ceremonies held in Babylon.

As to whether the claims made in the Cyrus Cylinder differed materially from those of previous conquerors, a close reading of the text permits three important conclusions. First, the Cylinder inscription places a heavy emphasis upon Cyrus' bloodless entry into Babylon. The purpose here is to distinguish Cyrus from previous conquerors, who had sacked the sacred city.¹² Second, few legitimization texts stress social rehabilitation as heavily as the Cyrus Cylinder. It is true that much of Cyrus' terminology finds precursors in

the inscriptions of earlier kings, who speak of “gathering” the Babylonian people to care for them. But Cyrus uses the same formula to communicate a more precise message. He “gathered” the expatriated inhabitants of Mesopotamia to return them to their homes. This impressive statement stands out in the extant Mesopotamian literary corpus. The closest analogs occur in the inscriptions of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, who repatriated those Babylonians taken into captivity by Sennacherib in 689 BCE.¹³ Third, whereas other inscriptions generally mention the renovation of cult centers outside Babylon in abstract terms, the Cyrus Cylinder enumerates specific settlements where dilapidated sanctuaries were rebuilt.¹⁴ Because these sanctuaries are not identical to those from which Nabonidus confiscated statutes (according to the Babylonian Chronicle), it is reasonable to assume that Cyrus did more than just reverse the policies of his vanquished adversary.

Other cuneiform documents, including the reliable Babylonian Chronicle, relate that Nabonidus did much to disrupt Mesopotamian social and religious life, and because widespread resentment of Nabonidus ultimately facilitated Cyrus’ take-over of the Babylonian Empire, we should expect the Persian conqueror to have re-established traditional societal norms in the aftermath of his victory. So, most of Cyrus’ remaining claims, such as those concerning his exaltation of Marduk and abolition of an unpopular corvée, may well address specific reparations undertaken by the Persian king, even though the terminology and structure of the text are generic.¹⁵

Cyrus’ reference to Ashurbanipal as a royal predecessor must also be analyzed in this light. This Assyrian king had become a revered figure in Babylon during the sixth century BCE due to the tremendous restoration work that he undertook early in his reign to atone for Sennacherib’s destruction of the city.¹⁶ Most notably, Ashurbanipal had refounded the cult of Marduk by completing the reconstruction of Esagila, returning the god’s idol from captivity in Nineveh, and authorizing substantial income to temple priests. These clergymen never forgot to whom they owed their hallowed place in Babylonian society and, therefore, perennially honored the Assyrian king as a champion of the national religion throughout the period in which Nabonidus attempted to undermine Marduk’s cult.[§] It is therefore significant that Cyrus’ titles in the Cylinder inscription represent an adaptation of Ashurbanipal’s titles, and not those usually carried by Nabonidus and other Babylonian kings.¹⁷ The Persian conqueror clearly saw the benefit of associating himself with a universal monarch, reputed as a protector of local traditions.

Because it draws so heavily on traditional Mesopotamian literary archetypes, some scholars have argued that the Cyrus Cylinder tells us

little about Persian imperial policy or, going one step farther, that Persian rule was indistinguishable from that of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who had governed with an iron fist and did not hesitate to commit atrocities to preserve their dominion.¹⁸ But such emphasis on literary similarities can be misleading, and it seems more instructive to compare the literary borrowings in the Cyrus Cylinder to the adaptation of Mesopotamian artistic motifs in Achaemenid monumental art. Achaemenid artistic traditions were largely based on Mesopotamian precedents, so it is noteworthy that scenes of war, conquest, enslavement, and torture, so common in Assyrian palace art, do not appear amid the ruins of Persepolis, Pasargadae, and Susa.¹⁹ A similar phenomenon may be observed with respect to the royal inscriptions of Cyrus and his successors, including the Cyrus Cylinder. Almost entirely absent from the Achaemenid literary corpus is the macabre revelry in human suffering that one encounters time and again in Assyrian texts. A particularly germane example occurs in the Rassam Cylinder, which belongs to the same literary genre as the Cyrus Cylinder and includes a memorialization Ashurbanipal's suppression of the revolt led by his brother Shamash-shum-ukin in 648 BCE:

Out of hunger, the flesh of their sons and daughters they ate . . . Afterward, I ripped out the tongues of those officers whose mouths had blasphemed against Ashur, my master, and then slaughtered them; any soldiers found still alive were flogged in front of the winged bulls built by Sennacherib, my grandfather; I whipped them on Sennacherib's tomb, and then tossed their quivering flesh for the jackals, the birds, and the fish to eat. In this way I placated the wrath of the gods who had become incensed by their ignominious deeds.²⁰

This grisly passage, relating to events that transpired in Babylon, precedes a brief description of the restorative work that Ashurbanipal undertook in that city. That the Assyrian king was unabashed about intertwining the account of his brutality with that of his clemency indicates that Mesopotamian royalty did not frown upon the infliction of vicious reprisals against conquered populations. This attitude enabled the Assyrian and Babylonian kings to base their policies largely on terror. During the two centuries preceding Cyrus' rise to power, the Assyrians and Babylonians had sacked nearly every major Near Eastern capital, and their preferred practices of population deportation and kidnapping sacred images had deeply traumatized the peoples of the ancient Near East.²¹

Cyrus and his successors apparently understood these facts, for

their selective borrowing of Mesopotamian artistic and literary motifs suggest the emergence of a new consciousness in imperial statecraft. Indeed, it seems safe to say that, despite his respect for certain earlier Assyrian and Babylonian kings, the Persian conqueror recognized the need to differentiate himself, for the subtleties of the Cylinder inscription demonstrate a conscious effort to portray Cyrus as embodying only the most tolerant and humane attributes of his imperial predecessors from Mesopotamia. In this sense, the Cyrus Cylinder introduces a new ideal for how a good king should treat his subjects.

As to whether the Persian conqueror and his successors actually lived up to this ideal, the Achaemenid kings could act brutally depending on the situation, and they occasionally implemented the same methods of conquest and pacification used by earlier Mesopotamian rulers. But what matters is the frequency and scale of action. Like the Assyrians and Babylonians before them, the Persian emperors were fundamentally concerned to develop their own power and, so, faced the same basic problems of administrative and territorial control. Yet, they were less prone to root out local cults, slaughter rebellious peoples, or employ the much hated practice of population deportation. The sources support this notion, for we do not hear of the Persians inflicting such punishments as often or to the same degree as their imperial predecessors from Mesopotamia.²² Nor do we hear of the Persians absorbing conquered peoples from outside their homeland into their own body-politic in the manner of the Assyrians, whose population transplantations effectively effaced ethnic identity in many parts of their empire.²³

Focusing upon the bigger picture, the very speed with which Persian rule spread across the Near East and Central Asia points to the emergence of a new political order, which the inhabitants of these lands readily welcomed.[¶] Based on recurring patterns, the historian Arnold Toynbee has reasoned that Achaemenid rule was accepted by the stricken peoples of the Near East because it offered them the “rest cure” that they needed from the last and worst bout of Assyrian militarism, from contemporaneous nomadic invasions, and from the subsequent wars between the Assyrian Empire’s successor states. Indeed, “the Achaemenian régime met with remarkably little resistance and succeeded in maintaining itself for more than two hundred years at the cost of an impressively slight exertion of force.”²⁴

The Inscription on the Cylinder

Despite lacking formal divisions, the Cylinder inscription proceeds in stages, discernible by theme. It begins with a brief introduction (lines 1 through 8) condemning Nabonidus as a vile pretender unfit to rule**:

When Marduk, king of the whole heaven and the earth [lacuna] who, in his [lacuna] broad intelligence [lacuna] who inspects the four quarters of the universe [lacuna]. An incompetent person was installed to exercise lordship over his country.²⁵ An imitation of Esagila he made. For Ur and the rest of the sacred centers, improper rituals [lacuna] daily he recited. Irreverently, he put an end to the regular offerings. He [lacuna]. [Lacuna] he established in the sacred centers. By his own plan, he did away with the worship of Marduk, the king of the gods; he continually did evil against his [Marduk's] city. Daily, [without interruption] [lacuna] he [imposed] the corvée upon its inhabitants unrelentingly, ruining them all.

Lines 9 to 11 of the inscription describe Marduk's reaction to Nabonidus' misdeeds:

Upon hearing their cries, the lord of the gods became furiously angry, [and he left] their borders [lacuna]; and the gods who lived among them forsook their dwellings, angry that he [Nabonidus] had brought them into Shuanna [Babylon].²⁶ [Eventually,] Marduk [lacuna] turned toward all the inhabitants that were abandoned and all the people of Sumer and Akkad who had become like corpses; he was reconciled and had mercy upon them.

In lines 11 through 14, the focus shifts to Cyrus, who appears as Marduk's chosen prince:

He [Marduk] surveyed and looked throughout all the lands, searching for a righteous king whom he would support. He took the hand of Cyrus, King of Anshan, and called out his name, pronouncing him to be king over all the world. He [Marduk] made the land of Gutium and all the Umman Manda bow in submission at his [Cyrus'] feet. And he [Cyrus] shepherded with justice and righteousness all the black-headed people, over whom he [Marduk] had given him victory. Marduk the great lord, guardian of his people, looked

with gladness upon his [Cyrus'] good deeds and upright heart.²⁷

Cyrus' victory over the Medes and Scythians thus occur according to Marduk's will, by which grace the conqueror also obtains dominion over the "black-headed people," an archaic term for the inhabitants of Sumer and Akkad. The circumstances of this conquest constitute the subject of lines 15 through 19:

He [Marduk] ordered him [Cyrus] to march to his city Babylon. He set him on the road to Tintir [Babylon], and like a companion and friend, he went at his side.²⁸ His [Cyrus'] vast army, whose number, like the water of the river, cannot be known, marched at his side fully armed.²⁹ He [Marduk] made him [Cyrus] enter his city Shuanna [Babylon] without fighting or battle; he saved Babylon from hardship.³⁰ He delivered Nabonidus, the king who did not revere him, into his hands. All the people of Tintir [Babylon], all the land of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors, bowed to him and kissed his feet. They rejoiced at his kingship and their faces shone. Ruler by whose aid the dead were revived and who had all been redeemed from hardship and difficulty, they greeted him with gladness and praised his name.³¹

Lines 20 through 22a establish the titles and genealogy of Cyrus, who now speaks in the first person³²:

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the universe, the son of [Cambyses](#), great king, king of Anshan, grandson of [Cyrus](#), great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, of an eternal line of kingship, whose rule [Bel](#) [Marduk] and Nabu [Marduk's son] love, whose kingship they desire for their hearts' pleasure.

The lines above aim to present Cyrus as one worthy of the Babylonian kingship. His ancestors are thus exalted as "great kings," even though they were really just vassals of the Medes.³³

In lines 22b to 28, which constitute the heart of the inscription, Cyrus recounts his bloodless occupation of Babylon and abolition of the corvée duty that Nabonidus had irreverently imposed upon the local citizenry:

When I entered Babylon in a peaceful manner, I took up my

lordly residence in the royal palace amid rejoicing and happiness. Marduk, the great lord, caused the magnanimous people of Babylon to love me, and I daily attended to his worship. My vast army moved about Babylon in peace; I did not permit anyone to frighten the people of Sumer and Akkad. I sought the welfare of the city of Babylon and all its sacred centers. As for the citizens of Babylon, upon whom he [Nabonidus] had imposed a corvée that was not the gods' will and not befitting them, I relieved their weariness and freed them from their service. Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced over my good deeds. He sent gracious blessings upon me, Cyrus, the king who worships him, and upon [Cambyses](#), the son who is my offspring, and upon all my army, and in peace, before him, we moved about.

Cyrus' occupation of Nabuchadnezzar's royal palace signifies his investiture as a native king. This point is made explicit when Nabonidus' former subjects arrive to pay him homage (lines 28 through 33):

By his [Marduk's] exalted word, all the kings who sit upon thrones throughout the world, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea [from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf], who live in the districts far-off, the kings of the West, who dwell in tents, all of them brought their heavy tribute before me, and in Babylon they kissed my feet. From Shuanna [Babylon] to Ashur and from [Susa](#), Akkad, Eshnunna, Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der, as far as the region of Gutium, I returned the idols of the gods, whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, to the sacred centers on the other side of the Tigris, and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their homes.³⁴ In addition, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I settled in their habitations, in pleasing abodes, the gods of Sumer and Akkad, whom Nabonidus, to the anger of the lord of the gods, had brought into Babylon.

The imagery used to describe the submission of the Westlands overflows with oriental splendor. Kissing the king's feet was a Mesopotamian custom, and the emphasis upon the weight of the tribute delivered to the monarch is something foreign to the Old Persian inscriptions. The lines concerning the restoration of divine statues and expatriated populations are of special interest to scholars, for they corroborate the actions attributed to Cyrus in the Bible. In

lines 34 through 36, the Persian conqueror prays for the preservation of his dynasty:

May all the gods whom I settled in their sacred centers ask daily of Bel and Nabu that my days be long, and may they intercede for my welfare. May they say to Marduk, my lord: “As for Cyrus, the king who reveres you, and Cambyses, his son, may they provide for our shrines until distant days.” May the population of Babylon call blessings upon my kingship. I settled all the lands in peaceful abodes.³⁵

The inscription concludes with a description of Cyrus’ temple dedications and architectural works (lines 37 through 45):

I daily increased the number of offerings to [*lacuna*] to [*lacuna*] geese, two ducks, and ten doves above the former offerings of geese, ducks, and wild doves. I strove to strengthen the defenses of the wall Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon, and I completed the quay of baked bricks on the bank of the moat, which a former king had built but had not completed its work. [*Lacuna*] which did not surround the city outside, which no former king had built, his workforce, the levy from his land in Babylon [*lacuna*] with bitumen and bricks, I built anew [*lacuna*] magnificent gates of cedar wood overlaid in bronze, and I installed all their doors, threshold slabs, and door fittings with copper parts [*lacuna*]. An inscription with the name of Ashurbanipal, a king who had preceded me, I saw within it. Marduk, the great lord [*lacuna*]. I presented as a gift [*lacuna*] your pleasure forever.

The presence of strong fortifications around an ancient city indicated local autonomy.³⁶ Cyrus’ strengthening of Babylon’s walls thus constituted a benign political gesture intended to recall the earlier works of popular Mesopotamian kings, such as Ashurbanipal, Nabopolassar, and Nabuchadnezzar, all of whom had performed restoration work on the Imgur-Enlil.³⁷ Among these rulers, Ashurbanipal was the most illustrious. He alone possessed a viable claim to universal monarchy and had saved the cult of Marduk from annihilation during the seventh century BCE. Cyrus desired a similar legacy for himself, hence his invocation of Ashurbanipal by name.

§ This was the case, even though Ashurbanipal sacked Babylon during the latter part of his reign in connection with the revolt of his brother Shamash-shum-ukin (see pages 33 and 488).

¶ By comparison, the Assyrians, whose oppressive means of

subjugation and imperial control created perpetual unrest in the provinces, waged at least one hundred and eight wars of conquest and reprisal between 890 BCE and 640 BCE to expand and maintain an empire, which, at its greatest extent, was about one-fourth the size of the Achaemenid state.

****** The following rendering of the Cyrus Cylinder inscription is based primarily upon the translations of Mordechai Cogan (2000), 314–316, and Irving Finkel (2013), 4–7.

The Verse Account of Nabonidus

The Verse Account of Nabonidus is a lengthy paean most probably composed by the Marduk priesthood to denigrate Nabonidus and legitimize Cyrus' rule in Babylonia. The poem is inscribed in six columns on two sides of a clay tablet, currently in the possession of the British Museum. Elizabeth von Voigtlander has argued that that the first five columns were composed before the Persian conquest of Babylon and incorporated popular songs circulated by Marduk's priests to lambaste Nabonidus.¹ That the sixth column, which extols Cyrus' virtues (including his veneration of Marduk), was drafted after the Persian conquest of Babylon is indisputable. What is interesting is that Nabonidus' own inscriptions corroborate certain information presented in the Verse Account.² Most notable is the incident involving Nabonidus' claim to have interpreted a series of astrological tablets. According to Nabonidus, the Babylonian king succeeded in reading these tablets, when his own scribes could not make sense of them. In the fifth column of the Verse Account, the same episode is cited as evidence of Nabonidus' hollow pretensions to literacy and sublime knowledge. This and other information, mostly pertaining to Nabonidus' military operations in Arabia, indicate that, despite its propagandistic tone, the Verse Account relates historical events accurately.³ The following translation is adapted from those of Leo Oppenheim and Amelie Kuhrt.⁴

Column 1

[*Lacuna*] law and order are not promulgated by him,

[*Lacuna*] he put the nobles to the sword,

[*Lacuna*] he blocked the road for the merchant.

[*Lacuna*] he made rare the grain measure for the farmer,

[*Lacuna*] plentiful crops were not in the land,

[*Lacuna*] harvesters did not sing traditional songs of peace,

[Lacuna] he did not protect the arable lands from flooding,
[Lacuna].

[Lacuna] he took away their possessions, scattered their possessions,
[Lacuna] he ruined completely,
[Lacuna] their corpses to a dark place,

[Lacuna] their shoulders became narrow.
[Lacuna] their faces became hostile,
[Lacuna] they did not parade along the wide street,
[Lacuna] you do not see happiness anymore,

[Lacuna] is unpleasant, they decided.
As to Nabonidus, his protective spirit became hostile to him,⁵
And he, the former favorite of the gods, is now seized by misfortunes,
[Lacuna] against the will of the gods, he performed an unholy act,

[Lacuna] he planned foolishness.
He made the image of a deity, which nobody had ever seen in this
country,
He introduced it into the temple, he placed it upon a pedestal,
[Lacuna] he called its name Nannar,⁶

[The idol] is adorned with [lacuna] of lapis lazuli, crowned with a
tiara.
[Lacuna] its appearance is that of the moon in eclipse,
[Lacuna] the gesture of its hand is like that of the god Lugal-shudu,⁷
[Lacuna] its head of hair reaches to the pedestal,
[Lacuna] in front of it are placed [images of] the Storm Dragon and
Wild Bull.

When he worshipped it, its appearance became like that of a [lacuna]
demon crowned with a tiara,
[Lacuna] his face turned hostile,
[Lacuna].

Column 2

[Lacuna],
Ea-Mumma could not have formed it,⁸
Not even the learned Adapa knows its name.⁹

Nabonidus said: "I shall build his [Sin's] house, I shall construct his

holy seat,
I shall form its first brick for him, I shall establish firmly its foundation,
I shall make a replica even of the temple Ekur,¹⁰

I shall call its name Ehulhul for all days to come!"
"When I have completed what I am building,
I shall take [Sin's] hand and set him in his dwelling.
Until I have achieved this and fulfilled my desire,

I shall omit the festival, the Akitu [New Year's] festival I shall order to cease!"

And he formed its first brick, did lay out the outlines,
He expanded its foundation, made high its summit.
With gypsum and bitumen he made its façade shine,

As with Esagila, he made a ferocious wild bull stand on guard in front of it.

After he fulfilled his desire, a work of falsehood,
[After] he built this abomination, a work of sacrilege, at the beginning of the third year,
He entrusted his military command to his first born [Belshazzar],

The troops everywhere in the country he placed under his command.
He let everything go, entrusted the kingship to [his son],
And, himself, he started out for a long journey,
The military forces of Akkad marching with him,
He turned toward Tema, deep in the west.

He started out the expedition on a path leading to a distant region.
When he arrived there,
He killed in battle the prince of Tema,
Slaughtered the flocks of those who dwell in the city and those who dwell in the countryside,

And he, himself, took his residence in Tema, the army of Akkad was stationed there.

He embellished the city, built there his palace,
Like the palace in Shuanna [Babylon], he built it [*lacuna*],
The treasure of the city and the country [*lacuna*],

He surrounded the town with sentinels [*lacuna*].

The inhabitants became troubled [*lacuna*],
The burden of molding bricks and carrying them in baskets he
imposed on them,
Through the hard work, they [*lacuna*].

Column 3

[*Lacuna*] for two months, he [Nabonidus or Belshazzar] killed the
people [*lacuna*],
Women and youngsters [*lacuna*],
He used up all their possessions [*lacuna*],
All the barley that he found therein [*lacuna*],
His weary army grumbled [*lacuna*],
“When will there be an end of [*lacuna*],”
Until now [*lacuna*],
The chief administrator of the city whom Cyrus [*lacuna*].

Column 4

[Almost entirely illegible]

Column 5

The praise of the Lord of Lords [Marduk] [*lacuna*], and the names of
countries,
Which he [Nabonidus] has not conquered he wrote on his stela.

About Cyrus, king of the world, whose triumphs are true,
And whose yoke the kings of all the countries are pulling,
He [Nabonidus] has written on his stone tablets, “I have made him
bow to my feet,
I personally have conquered his countries, his possessions I took to my
residence.”¹¹

He would stand in the assembly, exalt himself;
“I am wise; I am knowledgeable: I have seen hidden things.
A tablet made with a cut reed [stylus] I do not know how to read, but
I have seen hidden things.”
Revelations have been made to me by Ilteri [Sin], everything he has
made known to me.
The astrological omen series *Moon-Crescent, Anu, and Enlil*, which
Adapa compiled,
I surpass it in all wisdom.”

He mixed up the rituals, confused the omens,
He put an end to the most important ritual observances,

As to the sacred images in Eagila, images that Ea-Mummu himself had created,
He looks at the images and utters blasphemies.

When he saw the crescent-symbol of Esagila, he made a [strange] gesture,
He assembled the priestly scholars, expounded to them as follows:
“For whom was this temple built if this is the symbol?
If it really belongs to Bel [Marduk] – his symbol, it would have been marked with the spade,
Therefore, Sin himself has already marked the temple with his own symbol.”

Zeriya, the official who used to crouch in front of him,
And Rimut, the bookkeeper, who used to have his court-position quite near to him,
Confirming the king’s words, agreed with his [nonsensical] declaration:
“Only now do we understand, since the king has explained it.”¹²

In the month of Nisannu, on the eleventh day, until the god was present on his seat,
[*Lacuna*].

Column 6

[*Lacuna*] for the inhabitants of Babylon, he [Cyrus] declared “peace,”¹³

[*Lacuna*] he appointed an official for the Ekur sanctuary.

He slaughtered large, sacrificial cattle with the ax, he butchered many sheep,

He put incense on the censer, the regular offerings of the Lord of Lords he ordered increased,

He constantly prayed to the gods, before whom he prostrated himself,
So that he might do what was in his heart.

He conceived the idea to repair the city of Babylon,

And he himself took up hoe, spade, and earth basket and began to complete the wall of Babylon!

The original plan of Nabuchadnezzar they [the inhabitants of Babylon] executed with a willing heart,

[*Lacuna*], he built the fortifications on the wall called Imgur-Enlil.¹⁴

The idols of the Babylonian gods, male and female, he returned to their shrines,

[*Lacuna*] those who had been removed from their sanctuaries, he has returned to their homes,

Their wrath he has appeased, their spirits he has gladdened,

[*Lacuna*] those deities whose power was low, he has brought back to life,

By serving them meals regularly.

Nabonidus' deeds he has erased,

[*Lacuna*] which he has constructed, all the sanctuaries,

[*Lacuna*] of his rule [*lacuna*] he has eradicated,

[*Lacuna*] he is a destroyer of foolishness.

[*Lacuna*] in all sanctuaries, his name is erased,

[*Lacuna*] whatever Nabonidus has made he [Cyrus] gave over to the flames,

[*Lacuna*] whatever Nabonidus has made, he [Cyrus] had fire consume,

[*Lacuna*] for Babylon his workhouse was set,

He who was in prison, his prison term was lifted,

He liberated those who were utterly oppressed,¹⁵

All rejoice to look upon him as king!

The Dynastic Prophecy

Composed during the Seleucid period, the so-called Dynastic Prophecy is an inscribed cuneiform tablet that recounts Babylonian history from Assyrian to Hellenistic times. Although it was composed after the fact, the text was written in the form of predictions of events that have yet to transpire. Furthermore, the inscription was composed in the archaic literary style of the Babylonian temples. As part of this style, the inscription is replete with archaic geographic and ethnic terms, and in the relevant portion refers to Persia as Elam.¹ Lines 11–24 of the inscription deal with Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon and demonstrate how Babylonian literati continued to view Cyrus positively long after his reign had ended:

There will arise a rebel prince [*lacuna*]. The dynasty of Harran he will establish. For 17 years he will exercise kingship. He will be stronger than the land and the festival of Esagila he will interrupt. A wall in Babylon he will build. He will plot evil against Akkad.

A king of Elam will set out. The royal scepter he will take from [the rebel prince]. From his throne he will remove him, and he will seize the throne. And the king whom he made rise from the throne, the king of Elam will change his place. In another land he will settle him. That king [of Elam] will be stronger than the land, and all the lands will bring him tribute. During his reign, Akkad will live in security.²

just as the nations.

justice to the nations.		
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[illegible]

of the captive peoples to their lands and the restoration of their temples – evidently a promise which Cyrus did carry out – and the submission, after the surrender of Babylon, of several Arab tribes . . . But the conquest of Egypt and Ethiopia which the prophet had promised Cyrus as a reward for deliverance of Israel . . . did not follow in Cyrus' lifetime.⁴

These divergences indicate that Second Isaiah and the author of the Cyrus Cylinder both obtained the basic elements of their propaganda from Persian agents before the conquest of Babylon. Furthermore, the literary similarities between the Cyrus Cylinder and earlier Mesopotamian legitimation texts indicate that the Persians had formulated this propaganda with the assistance of learned Babylonian collaborators (specifically, the Marduk priesthood).

Second Isaiah, Cyrus, and Yahweh the Creator

Yahweh's creation of the cosmos constitutes an important and unprecedented theme in Second Isaiah's compositions. Like the prophet's pro-Persian propaganda, the majority of cosmological references are concentrated in chapters 40 through 48 of the Book of Isaiah. Second Isaiah mentions Yahweh's creation of the cosmos incessantly in these chapters but only once in a subsequent verse (Isaiah 51:13). Morton Smith's thesis that Second Isaiah's conception of Yahweh the Creator was inspired by Persian propaganda is based on the observation that "the cosmological material, which has Persian parallels, and the political material, which had a Persian source, are found almost exclusively in the same section of the book. Moreover, in that section, they are most often found in close connection."¹ The relevant passages are set forth below:²

- Isaiah 42:5–6: This is what God the Lord says – he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the Lord, have called you [Cyrus] in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."³

- Isaiah 44:24–28: This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,

who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be built," and of their ruins, "I will restore them," who says to the watery deep, "Be dry, and I will dry up your streams," who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"

- Isaiah 45:1–8: This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting, men may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the Lord do all these things."
- Isaiah 45:12–13: It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts. I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty.
- Isaiah 48:12–15: Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together . . . The Lord's chosen ally [Cyrus] will carry out his purpose against Babylon; his arm will be against the Babylonians. I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission.

These verses also shed light on Cyrus' religious beliefs. Accepting Smith's theory that Second Isaiah's compositions reflect Persian religious ideas, we can assume that Cyrus emphasized his receipt of temporal power from the god of creation. Such interest in the creation

is a constant theme in the inscriptions of Darius I and his successors, as well as in Zoroaster's Gathas. As noted by Ugo Bianchi, fixation on the origin of the cosmos is consistent with the exaltation of the Zoroastrian Ahuramazda, the only deity mentioned in extant Iranian sources as having created the heavens, earth, and man. It is incompatible with a religion in which Mithra was the chief god, for, despite his role in maintaining social stability and the ever important cycle of life and death, there is little evidence to show that the Iranians ever venerated Mithra as the original creator of all things.

Cyrus and the Book of Daniel

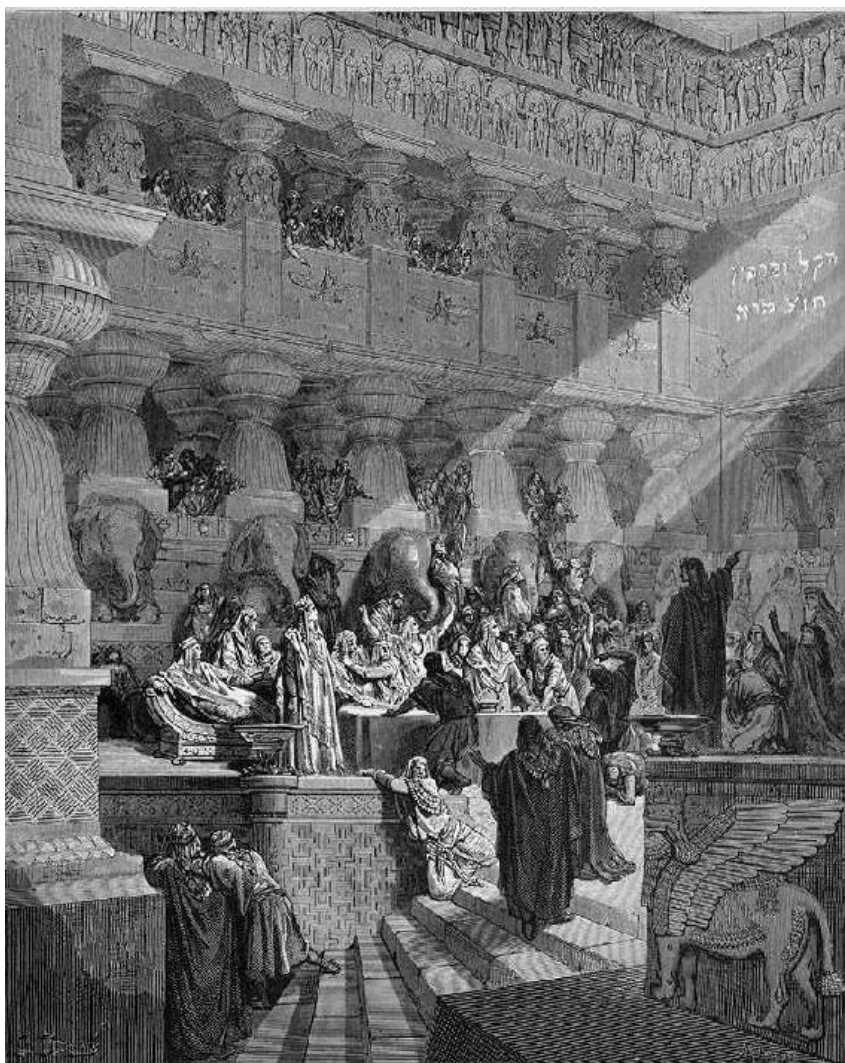
Second Isaiah was the most prominent and best known of Cyrus' Jewish advocates within the Babylonian Empire. But he was hardly the only one. A number of prophecies pertaining to the Persian conqueror were preserved in the Book of Daniel, and these must be attributed to one or more sources other than Second Isaiah.

The Book of Daniel is a historical novel, comprised of various tales and legends that circulated among the Jews during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods. The final redaction of the text occurred in 167–163 BCE. However, much of the original text was composed in Achaemenid Babylonia and, therefore, reflects conditions and beliefs intrinsic to that time and place. The book's central figure was, of course, the sage Daniel. Jewish tradition does not portray Daniel as a prophet in the purest sense; but the Jews remembered him for experiencing visions purporting to reveal the future.¹ That Daniel was an actual historical figure is questionable. The eminent biblical scholar Elias Bickerman has characterized him as a legendary prototype of pre-Exilic origin.² However, Ernst Herzfeld has argued for Daniel's historicity. In Herzfeld's estimation, Daniel was born in 602 BCE and was taken into Babylonian Captivity in 597 BCE.³

According to the book, Daniel flourished in Babylon, where his wisdom caught the attention of Nabuchadrezzar, who made him his chief chancellor, and bestowed upon him the honorary name Nabu-Balat-Usur, "O Nabu, Protect His Life!"⁴ Daniel's career spanned the reigns of Nabuchadrezzar and his successors, down to the time of the Persian conquest. After the Persians took over, Daniel distinguished himself in the service of "Darius the Mede," the enigmatic and probably fictional character whom the later redactors of Daniel mistakenly remembered as the first Iranian king to rule over Babylon.

Some of the material in the Book of Daniel incorporates stories that Cyrus and his supporters disseminated in Babylonia before the Persian conquest. Thus, the famous tale of Nabuchadrezzar's madness

in the fourth chapter of the book, represents a distortion of the original story, which, as we know from a Dead Scroll and a fragment attributed to the Greek traveler Megasthenes (lived 350–290 BCE), portrayed Nabonidus as the king who lost his mind and lived among animals in the wilderness (that is, in the barrens of northern Arabia).⁵ The purpose of the story was to portray Nabonidus as mentally unstable and an illegitimate ruler of the Babylonian Empire. Both themes receive heavy emphasis in the Cyrus Cylinder and other Babylonian inscriptions honoring the Persian founder.



Nineteenth-century wood engraving of Belshazzar's feast by Gustave Doré. It shows the handwriting on the wall, which Daniel reputedly interpreted to signify Babylon's fall to the Persians. According to Elias Bickerman, other prophecies in

Other relevant information relating to Cyrus has been deemed to exist in material that does not expressly reference the Persian conqueror. Here, something must be said about the phenomenon of “hanging prophecies.” In ancient times, people did not usually forget important prophecies that were particularly creative or vivid, even after such utterances had been fulfilled or proven false; rather, they usually adapted these prophecies to fit new historical conditions.⁶ In this connection, it is important to note that the final redaction of the Book of Daniel occurred at a time when the Jews yearned for salvation from the harsh persecutions of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes. These persecutions precipitated a demand for reassuring prophecies that Jewish suffering would come to an end and that the Jews themselves would be redeemed. This explains the keen interest that Antiochus’ Jewish subjects took in the story of Daniel, who was believed to have lived during a similar period of Jewish crisis. For the final redactors of the Book of Daniel, the ultimate salvation from the iniquitous rule of the Greeks would occur at the apocalypse. Accordingly, the book contains many references to visions that purportedly signify the rise and fall of empires and the end of days. As Bickerman has demonstrated, however, a number of these prophecies were reworked from older utterances concerning Cyrus’ overthrow of the Babylonian Empire.⁷

One such prophecy occurs in the second chapter of the biblical book. Here, Nabuchadnezzar dreams of a colossal statue of himself, with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with clay. Daniel’s interpretation is that the different metals signify the different world empires that would rise and fall until the time of the apocalypse.⁸ However, this is a very late interpretation, predicated upon the notion of a succession of empires – itself, perhaps, a Persian concept – as that notion was reworked in the Hellenistic period.[†] As Bickerman has shown, the association of the human body with different metals and stones was a recurring Near Eastern literary motif that usually signified the premature termination of a powerful dynasty.⁹ On this basis, he has concluded that the original prophecy foretold the imminent fall of the Babylonian Empire within a few generations of Nabuchadnezzar’s death. Pursuant to this interpretation, the different components of the colossus did not signify the passing of future kingdoms, of which the author of the original prophecy could have had no knowledge, but rather Nabuchadnezzar and the kings who would succeed him. Nabuchadnezzar was the head of gold, and Nabonidus the feet of iron mixed with clay.

Vestiges of another prophecy may survive in the reference found in the eighth chapter of Daniel to the Persian Empire as a two-horned ram charging to the west, north, and south.¹⁰ This portion of the biblical book was written in Hebrew at a later date than the preceding six chapters, which were composed in Aramaic, and the final redaction places the mention of the ram within the context of another prophecy concerning the rise and fall of world empires. But this later oracle was almost certainly based on underlying material going back to the period of Achaemenid rule, if not earlier.¹¹ Assuming this to be the case, the allusion to Cyrus as a powerful ram may be interpreted in line with other attested references to the Persian conqueror as a bird of prey or an indomitable boar.¹² These allegorical references were fitting for prophetic utterances concerning the conqueror, because the ancient Iranians associated all three animals with the Royal Glory, or *Farnah*, the divine aura that virtuous kings were believed to possess.

The prophecies in the Book of Daniel thus attest to Persian influence in Babylonia during the years preceding Cyrus' conquest. These utterances are not as lofty or high-minded as the oracles found in the works of Second Isaiah and, therefore, may represent the work of popular story-tellers rather than trained theologians. Nevertheless, they shed valuable light on the atmosphere that existed within the Babylonian Empire on the eve of its fall to the Persians and demonstrate how inevitable the Jews deemed this collapse to be.

† Regarding the historiography of successive world empires, see Appendix XX.

The Satrapies

The little information we possess on Cyrus' satrapies suggests that the Persian founder preferred larger territorial divisions to smaller ones. Carved before Darius' satrapal reforms, the Bisutun Inscription is particularly enlightening as to the extent of the administrative units that Cyrus established in Iran proper and the lands to the east.¹ In the text (§ 34), Darius summarizes events in Media, eastern Armenia, and northeastern Assyria with the declaration, "this is what was done by me in Media," thus implying that all these territories belonged to the Median satrapy. Elsewhere (§ 37), the text describes actions fought in Parthia and Hyrcania as occurring within the satrapy of Parthia. The suppression of the Margian revolt (§ 43) is deemed to take place in the Bactrian satrapy. The Arachosian satrapy is the scene of a battle fought in Sattagydia (§ 48). And the territory of the Utians in southern Carmania forms part of the same administrative unit as Persia (§ 45–47). The implication is that all the territories to the east of the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia and Armenia were divided between a handful of provinces, including the Persian homeland, which was not technically a satrapy.

Under Cyrus' successors, important developments occurred in the administrative organization of the satrapies. Herodotus states that shortly after ascending the throne Darius I organized his empire into twenty "provincial governorships, called satrapies," for tax purposes, and in an important passage, the Greek historian lists these satrapies, along with the tribute paid by each in Euboean talents.² The common belief that Herodotus based his list on an authentic Achaemenid document remains hypothetical, and some scholars have characterized it as a pure fabrication.

As an alternative to Herodotus' tax list, a number of scholars have attempted to reconstruct the register of Darius' twenty satrapies from other sources. Particularly noteworthy are those attempts that have focused on the enumerations of subject countries (Old Persian

Sardians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Sardians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Aeolians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Aeolians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
The Northeast (continued)		The Northeast (continued)	
Bactrian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Bactrian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Gandarians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Gandarians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Gandarians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Gandarians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Chorasmians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Chorasmians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Saka Haumavarga (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Saka Haumavarga (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Saka Sigrakhauda (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Saka Sigrakhauda (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
The Northwest		The Northwest	
Antennian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Antennian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Moschi, Tibareni, Macrones, Mosynoeci, and Mares – 300 silver talents		Moschi, Tibareni, Macrones, Mosynoeci, and Mares – 300 silver talents	
Colchians (tributary allies) not mentioned		Colchians (tributary allies) not mentioned	
Cappadocian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Cappadocian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Thracians of Asia, Paphlagonians, Mariandynians, and Syrians (Cappadocians) – 360 silver talents		Thracians of Asia, Paphlagonians, Mariandynians, and Syrians (Cappadocians) – 360 silver talents	
The Northwest (continued)		The Northwest (continued)	
Lydian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Lydian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Ionians, Dorians, Aeolians, and Cypriotes – 400 silver talents		Ionians, Dorians, Aeolians, and Cypriotes – 400 silver talents	
European Scythians or Thracians: Pikes, shields, horses		European Scythians or Thracians: Pikes, shields, horses	
Cilician (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Cilician (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
The Southwest		The Southwest	
Babylonian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Babylonian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Assyrian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Assyrian (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
Arabs (tributary allies) – 1,000 talents of frankincense		Arabs (tributary allies) – 1,000 talents of frankincense	
Egyptians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents		Egyptians (tributary allies) 300 silver talents	
The Persian Garrison in the White Castle		The Persian Garrison in the White Castle	

Libyans: Chariots, ibexes				
Ethiopians: (Elephant tusks), giraffes (imokapif)				Ambyes II) –
Virgin gold, two hundred logs of ebony, five boys, and				
twenty elephant tusks				

Two points immediately stand out. First, Darius generally subdivided the satrapies he inherited by forming distinct administrative units from pre-existing districts or sub-satrapies (under Cyrus, each satrap presided over a number of subordinate sub-satraps). Second, several incongruences exist between Herodotus’ tax list and the register of satrapies derived from the cuneiform records. These disparities could reflect errors in transmission on the part of Herodotus or his sources, separate bureaucratic divisions of imperial territory for administrative and fiscal purposes, or different stages in the organization of the provinces (it is conceivable that Darius executed two satrapal reforms during his reign, the first of which was reflected in Herodotus’ tax list and the second in the *dahyava*-lists and later classical writings).⁵ What seems significant is that Herodotus’ tax districts are not always organized neatly along national lines, and this may attest to the existence of motives aside from sheer administrative efficiency.

Arnold Toynbee has interpreted the evidence to suggest a subtle, yet important, change in administrative strategy precipitated by the events of 522–521 BCE.⁶ According to Toynbee, Cyrus’ practice had been to respect the territorial integrity of the empires he had subdued by converting them into provinces within his universal state. By contrast, Darius engaged in repressive partitioning. His purpose was to subject those peoples, including the Medes, Armenians, and Utians, who had opposed him at the outset of his reign to tighter imperial control (and presumably higher taxes), as well as to tacitly obliterate vestiges of important pre-Achaemenid polities, for fear that they might be resurrected.

Paradises

The old-Indo-Iranian religion had centered upon nature worship, and elements of nature worship survived in Zoroastrianism. The ancient Iranians venerated trees, vines, and other fauna, and recognized plants, alongside humans and beasts, as one of three basic life forms.

According to the Zoroastrian creation myth, Ahuramazda created but one man, one plant, and one animal at the beginning of time. The subsequent proliferation of human ethnicities and animal and plant species reflected the divisive influence of the Lie, as advanced by the demonic Angra Mainyu, who sought to create turmoil and conflict in the universe. An important aspect of Zoroastrian eschatology involved the reunification of diverse life-forms, including man, within a single abode, wherein all coexist peacefully and happily. Bruce Lincoln has seen in this eschatological notion an explanation for the Persian fascination with special parks or ornamental gardens called “paradises,” of which the earliest known example is the one that Cyrus created at Pasargadae. The ancient sources understood paradises to be distinctly Persian creations and differentiated between them and ordinary gardens due to the exceptionally diverse sample of plant and animal life that paradises contained. According to Lincoln, paradises were stocked in this manner, because the Persians viewed them as microcosmic forerunners of the perfect world that would attain following the eradication of the Lie.¹ This would explain why the Persians traditionally bestowed “heavenly” names upon their paradises.² And it seems hardly coincidental that the biblical Book of Genesis uses the term “paradise” to describe the Garden of Eden.

Jenny Rose has recently elaborated upon Lincoln’s theory by emphasizing the importance, within a Zoroastrian context, of paradises, and gardens in general, as aromatic places.³ In Zoroastrianism, one of Angra Mainyu’s distinctive traits is his rank odor, which flowers and plants naturally repel. This, together with the

universally held ancient belief that beneficent deities promote fertility whereas evil spirits cause drought, motivated the Persians to create paradises around the final resting places of their heroes. Thus, the classical authors relate that Cyrus' tomb was situated within a grove containing "all kinds" of plants, and according to the Elamite tablets from Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, the designated resting place of Darius I and his successors, was also the location of a royal paradise. In this connection, it may be of interest that Pasargadae was the scene of Cyrus' great victory over the Medes, and his decision to design the site principally as a garden park may bespeak the conqueror's desire to honor his fallen soldiers.

But paradises represented much more than just sacred gardens. They reflected an important function of the king – namely, his ability to enhance the land under his sway. This aspect of the kingly mission constituted a direct inheritance from the Assyrians and Medes that the Achaemenids took to new heights.⁴ The Persian kings thus created paradises throughout their realm, and a Babylonian record from 534 BCE refers to a paradise that Cyrus' men prepared in Mesopotamia almost immediately after the Persian conquest.⁵ In pouring through the classical literature, one gets the sense that the Greeks were habitually stunned when, after traveling through the arid terrain of, say, Anatolia or Iran, they came upon these lush tracts of green, some of which were quite large. Alexander the Great treated his entire army to a feast within the paradise that the Achaemenids had established near Maracanda in Transoxiana, and the sources make clear that the Persians used certain paradises as hunting parks, where they could stalk, pursue, and down hundreds, if not thousands, of prey, either on foot or on horseback.⁶ As hunting represented the premier form of military exercise, paradises also functioned as training grounds for the king and aristocracy.

The ideological principle requiring paradises to contain diverse species of plants and animals moved the Achaemenids to draw upon the vast ecological resources of their empire, and as a result, paradises came to reflect the territorial extent of Persian rule. Like the masters of the Assyrian Empire, the Achaemenids prided themselves in presiding over a cosmopolitan state, and paradises were another indication of this. The Persian kings went to great lengths to stock their paradises with trees, flowers, and other fauna from distant satrapies. In his famous letter to Gadatas, Darius I praises his satrap for importing fruit trees from Syria to Asia Minor. As this episode illustrates, paradises functioned almost as botanical laboratories.

Given the important ideological concepts at issue, it is hardly surprising that paradises served as important symbols of Persian royal might. To pillage one was tantamount to treason or an act of war.⁷

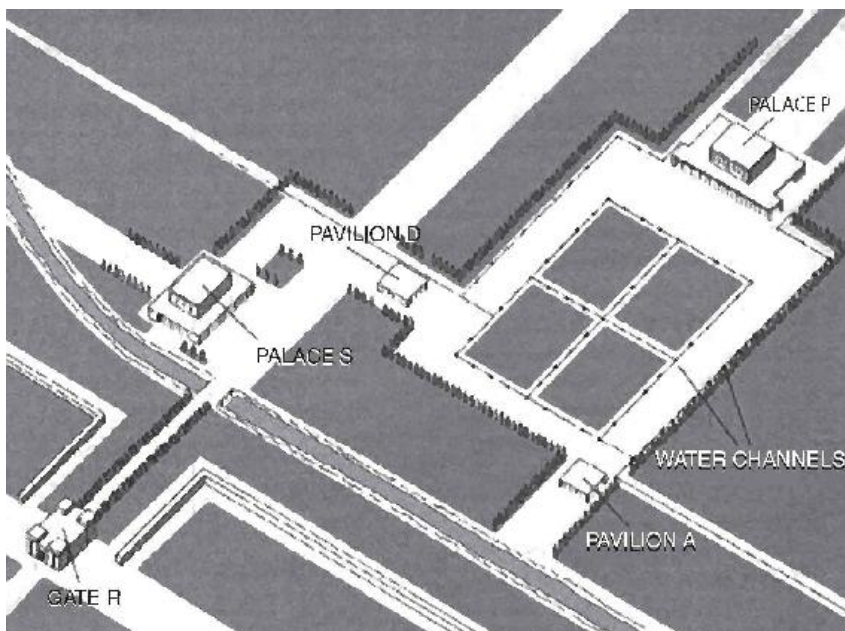
The Greeks marveled at the close attention that Persian royalty gave to their gardens. Xenophon provides a particularly charming anecdote about how Cyrus the Younger once entertained the Spartan admiral Lysander by showing him his paradise at Sardis: “Lysander admired the beauty of the trees in it, the accuracy of the spacing, the straightness of the rows, the regularity of the angles and the multitude of the sweet scents that clung round them as they walked; and for wonder of these things he cried, ‘Cyrus, I really do admire all these lovely things, but I am far more impressed with your agent’s skill in measuring and arranging everything so exactly.’ Cyrus was delighted to hear this and said: ‘Well, Lysander, the whole of the measurement and arrangement is my own work, and I did some of the planting myself.’ ‘What, Cyrus?’ exclaimed Lysander, looking at him, and marking the beauty and perfume of his robes, and the splendor of the necklaces and bangles and other jewels he was wearing; ‘Did you really plant part of this with your own hands?’ ‘Does that surprise you, Lysander?’ asked Cyrus in reply. ‘I swear by Mithra that I never yet sat down to dinner when in sound health, without first working hard [literally, working up a sweat] at some task of war or agriculture, or exerting myself somehow.’”⁸

Lysander’s amazement at the precise spacing and arrangement of the paradise at Sardis brings to mind another interesting Persian gardening practice, which may have commenced with Cyrus the Great. Historically, the standard form of Persian garden at elite residences has been the *chahar bagh* (literally, “fourfold garden”). This is a square or rectangular garden, which has been divided into two halves, each bisected by a walkway to produce four quadrants. Until recently, there was little evidence for the existence of such gardens before the Safavid period. However, in reconstructing the layout of the central garden at Pasargadae, David Stronach realized that it must have been a *chahar bagh*.⁹ Specifically, Stronach arrived at this understanding while attempting to visualize the view that Cyrus would have had of his garden from the outward facing throne in the portico of Palace P. It bears emphasis that this configuration of the royal seat represents an Iranian architectural novelty introduced under Cyrus. Previously, under the Medes, the throne was always positioned within the inner recesses of the palace. Like the absence of a perimeter wall around Pasargadae, the outward facing throne in Palace P has been interpreted to reflect Cyrus’ attitude toward kingship, which may have been more inviting and inclusive than that espoused by other Near Eastern monarchs. Reflecting the “four cardinal directions” and “four corners of the world” over which the Persian king claimed sovereignty, this fourfold division of the central garden also made sense from an ideological standpoint. So it passed that the *chahar bagh*

became a permanent canon of Persian garden design for kings and aristocrats through the ages.



Cyrus used stone-cut channels with decorative edging to irrigate the garden at Pasargadae. The channels were approximately ten inches wide and five inches deep.



Drawing of Pasargadae showing the *chahar bagh*, or “fourfold” garden, and the configuration of the surrounding structures.

Herodotus’ Roster of the Achaemenid Army

Herodotus’ catalog of the military contingents that Xerxes led to Greece in 480 BCE provides a wealth of information on the ethnography and organization of the Achaemenid Empire, as well as on the arms and attire of the Great King’s troops. A number of scholars believe that Herodotus reproduced this catalog from an authentic Persian document that either fell into Greek hands following one of the defeats suffered by Xerxes or his chief general Mardonius or was provided to him by one of his Iranian sources.¹ According to other authorities, the historian based his description on the spectacle of a ceremonial military parade performed in the presence of the Persian king.² Still other scholars believe that Herodotus simply fabricated the catalog based on material gleaned from earlier sources, including the Ionian geographer Hecataeus.³ In this connection, one might think that Herodotus, who viewed the Persian Wars as a second iteration of the Trojan War, devised the list to parallel the *Iliad*’s account of the Greek forces with which Agamemnon assaulted Troy.⁴ Whatever the case, Herodotus’ description of Xerxes’ troops is more or less consistent with the visual evidence from ancient art, including the reliefs on the staircases of the Apadana at Persepolis. In this sense, the catalog offers a good idea of what the ancient troops looked like, even though it fails to account for certain details of dress, including footwear and variations in attire between light infantry, heavy infantry, and cavalry, and overlooks the fact that the more bizarre contingents functioned as mere service personnel and never participated in actual combat. The following table is adapted from Aubrey de Sélincourt’s translation of paragraphs 7.61–7.99 of *The Histories*:

	Regular Infantry and Service Personnel		

Presides	of these troops consisted of the tiara, or soft felt cap, embroidered tunic with sleeves, a coat of mail looking like scales of a fish, and trousers; for arms they carried light wicker shields, quivers slung below them, short spears, powerful bows with cane arrows, and daggers swinging from belts beside the right thigh.		
Wides	contingent was equipped in the same way as the Persian – in point of fact this mode of dress was originally Median and not Persian at all.		
Esians	(Slavians) like the Persian, except that instead of caps they wore fillets [a sort of headband].		
They were	armed in the same way as the Persians.		
They were	equipped with bronze helmets made in a complicated outlandish way which is hard to describe, shields, spears, daggers (like the Egyptian ones), wooden clubs studded with iron, and linen corslets . . . With them were the Chaldeans.		
Bactrians	Sakachians almost exactly like those worn by the Medes, and were armed with their native cane bows and short spears. The Sakas . . . wore trousers and tall pointed hats set upright on their heads, and were armed with bows of their country, daggers, and the sagaris, or battle-axe. ⁵		
They were	dressed in cotton and carried cane bows and cane arrows tipped with iron.		
They were	armed with Median bows, the rest of their equipment being the same as the Bactrians'.		
They were	also in Bactrian equipment.		
They were	also in Bactrian equipment.		
They were	dressed in leather jackets and armed with the acinaces and the cane bow of their country.		
They were	armed with bows and Median spears, and conspicuous for their brightly colored clothes and high boots reaching to the knee.		
They were	equipped, like the Pactyans, with leather jackets, bows, and daggers.		
They were	equipped, like the Pactyans, with leather jackets, bows, and daggers.		
The Arabs	Ethiopianseira [a sort of long flowing garment], caught in the belt; their weapon was the bow, carried at the right side – a reverse bow, which assumed a reverse curve when unstrung. The Ethiopians, in their leopard skins and lion skins, carried long bows made of palm-wood – as much as six feet tall – which were used to shoot small cane arrows		

tipped not with iron but with stone worked to a fine point, like the stone used for engraving seals. They also had spears with spearheads of antelope horn, and knotted clubs. When going to battle they smeared half their bodies with chalk and half with vermillion.			
At this time the Ethiopians from Asia was in most respects like the Indian, except that they wore headdresses consisting of horses' scalps, stripped off with the ears and mane attached – the ears were made to stand erect and the mane served as a crest. For shields they used the skins of cranes.			
They were clothed in leather and carried javelins hardened with fire.			
Regular Infantry and Service Personnel (continued)			
The Paphlagonians and Mariandriani carried small shields, fairly short spears, javelins, and daggers. They wore the native high boot reaching half-way to the knee.			
They wore iron helmets and carried small shields, fairly short spears, javelins, and daggers. They wore the native high boot reaching half-way to the knee. ⁶			
They dressed as Armenians except for exceptions, like the Paphlagonian. ⁷			
The Lycians and Mysians not closely resembled the Greek. The Mysians wore the native helmet and were armed with small shields and javelins made of wood hardened in fire.			
They wore fawnskin (Bithynian) dress, tunics with the zeira, or long cloak, in this case brightly colored, thrown over them, and high fawnskin boots; their weapons were the javelin, light shield, and small dagger.			
The Pisidians, Cabalians, and Milyans had shields and a pair of hunting-spears of Lycian workmanship, and wore bronze helmets, crested and decorated with the ears and horns of an ox, also in bronze. Their legs were bound with strips of crimson cloth . . . The Cabalians (who are really Maeonians but are known as Lasonians) had the same kind of equipment as the Cilicians . . . The Milyans carried short spears and had their clothes fastened with brooches; some of them were also armed with Lycian bows and wore leather casques.			
They had small iron helmets and were armed with shields and short spears with long heads.			
They wore and Milyans were allied to the Moschians and Tibareni.			
The Mariandriani wore peculiar plaited helmets of their country and were armed with little leather shields and javelins; the Colchians had wooden helmets, small shields made of rawhide, short spears, and swords.			

~~78~~ ~~Arvovians and Salyrians~~ named as the Colchians.

Þorvaldur Guldissend (political exile as settled by Medkang)

fashion.8

Elite Infantry⁹

Definitely and simultaneously, they were not only the best but also the most magnificently equipped . . . every man glittered in gold which he carried about his person in unlimited quantities.

Mounted Units

These Persian and Sagartians were valued in the same way as the infantry, except that some of them wore devices of hammered bronze or iron on their heads . . . The nomad tribe called the Sagartians, a people who speak Persian and dress in a manner half Persian, half Pactyan . . . their custom is to carry no weapons of bronze or iron except daggers; the special weapon upon which they chiefly rely is the lasso made of plaited strips of hide. In action, the moment they are in contact with the enemy, they throw their lassos, which have a noose at the end, and haul toward them whatever they catch, horse or man. The victim, tied up and helpless, is then dispatched.¹⁰

Mounted Units (continued)

~~The planes were dropped like their infantry.~~

They were determined to make their infantry.

Ardians were like the Indian foot, they rode, some on horseback, some in chariots drawn by either horses or wild asses.			
---	--	--	--

But they were not Gaspe Indians and their infantry.

They are like their infantry in equipment, but all riding in chariots.				
--	--	--	--	--

They again had the same reasons as their infancy.

They are	equipped like their infantry,	rode camels, which in
speed	are not inferior to horses.	

Contingents Described Only in Connection With the Fleet	
1	

Their iron helmets, like the Greek ones, and linen corselets; they were armed with rimless shields and javelins. The officers wore turbans, the common sailors peaked hats.

The rest of their equipment resembled the Greek.

They wore the native helmet and woollen corselets and carried light rawhide shields. Each man was armed with two javelins and a sword which closely resembled the Egyptian long knife.				
--	--	--	--	--

The playwright was Greek.

They wore greaves and corselets: they carried bows of cornel

wood, cane arrows without feathers, and javelins. They had goatskins slung round their shoulders, and hats stuck round

with feathers. They also carried daggers and riphooks.

Their equipment was similar to the Greek, except that they carried riphooks and daggers.				
---	--	--	--	--

Phoenicians, Egyptians, Dorians, Greeks, Thracians, Greeks from Asia and the Aegean islands		
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The Saka Tigrakhauda

The Tribes Comprising the Saka Tigrakhauda

The Saka Tigrakhauda, or “Pointed-Hat Sakas,” were a nomadic confederation comprised of the Massagetae, Derbices, Dahae, Apasiacae, and, perhaps, other tribes, including some affiliated with the Alans (who became prominent during the Parthian and Roman periods). The Greek authors usually referred to this nomadic confederation by the name of its most dominant tribe. Thus, Ctesias spoke of Cyrus marching against the Derbices, because they comprised the most powerful group within the confederation around the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Likewise, the Alexander historians knew Cyrus’ opponents as the Apasiacae, the most prominent constituency within the confederation at the time of the Macedonian conquest. As to the inclusion of the Dahae, Herodotus states that the Massagetae ruled over much of the region to the east of the Caspian Sea, and as this territory included the abode of the Dahae, it may be presumed that the Dahae were part of the same tribal group as the Massagetae.¹ This presumption is consistent with the testimonies of the Alexander historians, who occasionally conflated the Dahae and Massagetae.² It also agrees with the evidence provided by Strabo, according to whom Arsaces, the third century BCE Dahan chieftain who founded the Parthian Empire, obtained support from the Apasiacae in his bid to obtain local power in northeastern Iran.³

It is nevertheless clear that the Dahae occasionally feuded with their fellow Saka Tigrakhauda and occasionally broke away from them. Thus, in his famous Daiva Inscription, Xerxes I counts the Dahae as separate from the Saka Tigrakhauda. Moreover, Strabo, who admits to having poor information on the Central Asian nomads, understood the Dahae and Massagetae to constitute two distinct tribal groups.⁴

The exact relationship between the Massagetae and Saka Tigrakhauda also presents certain complications. The Greek rendering

“Massagetae” is believed to reflect Old Iranian **Mas-Saka* or **Mas-Saka-Ta*, meaning the “Great Sakas” or the “Great Saka Horde.”⁵ This is usually thought to have been the name of the most important division within the Saka Tigrakhauda at the time that Herodotus or his sources obtained information on Cyrus’ final campaign. However, the possibility exists that the two terms, “Massagetae” and “Saka Tigrakhauda,” were essentially equivalent and that each denoted the confederation as a whole. In this connection, attention is due to the significance of the tall, upright hat as a marker of elite social status among the ancient Iranians and steppe nomads. Among these peoples, the wearing of the *tigra-khauda*, or “pointed hat,” was a special privilege belonging to those with great power and authority. So “Pointed-Hat Sakas” may have been another way of saying “Great Sakas.” The situation may be compared to that of the so-called “Royal Scythians” in southern Russia, who also donned tall headgear and deemed themselves superior to other nomadic groups.⁶

The Origins of the Epithet “Tigrakhauda”

It is generally assumed that “Tigrakhauda” was a name given to the Sakas of the Caspian steppe by the Persians to distinguish them from other nomadic groups encountered in Central Asia. However, one should not discount the possibility that “Tigrakhauda” was a self-styled designation of these tribes, as history offers many examples of Central Asian nomads naming themselves after their headgear. Prominent examples include the ninth century CE Kara Kobluks, or “Black Hoods,” and the Kara Kalpaks, or “Black Hats,” who still live to the south of the Aral Sea. More famous in Iranian history were the Qizilbash, or “Red Heads,” the seven Turcoman tribes that helped establish the Safavid state in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Their name derived from their distinctive crimson headgear, which contained twelve gores, one for each Shiite imam.⁷

The Saka Tigrakhauda as the Great Turanian Enemy of the Western Iranians

According to the distinguished Orientalist Josef Marquart, the legend of the feud between Iran and Turan originated in Chorasmia, in response to Massagetan raids upon local agricultural communities.⁸ Marquart’s belief was that the Massagetae, one of the core tribes of the

Saka Tigrakhauda, included the original Turanian people, who occupied and gave their name to the Chorasmian territory of Tur, mentioned by the Armenian historians.⁹ The relationship between this territory and the district of Turiva, which Strabo situated between Parthia and Bactria remains unclear, but the Saka Tigrakhauda may well have occupied the latter region, too.¹⁰

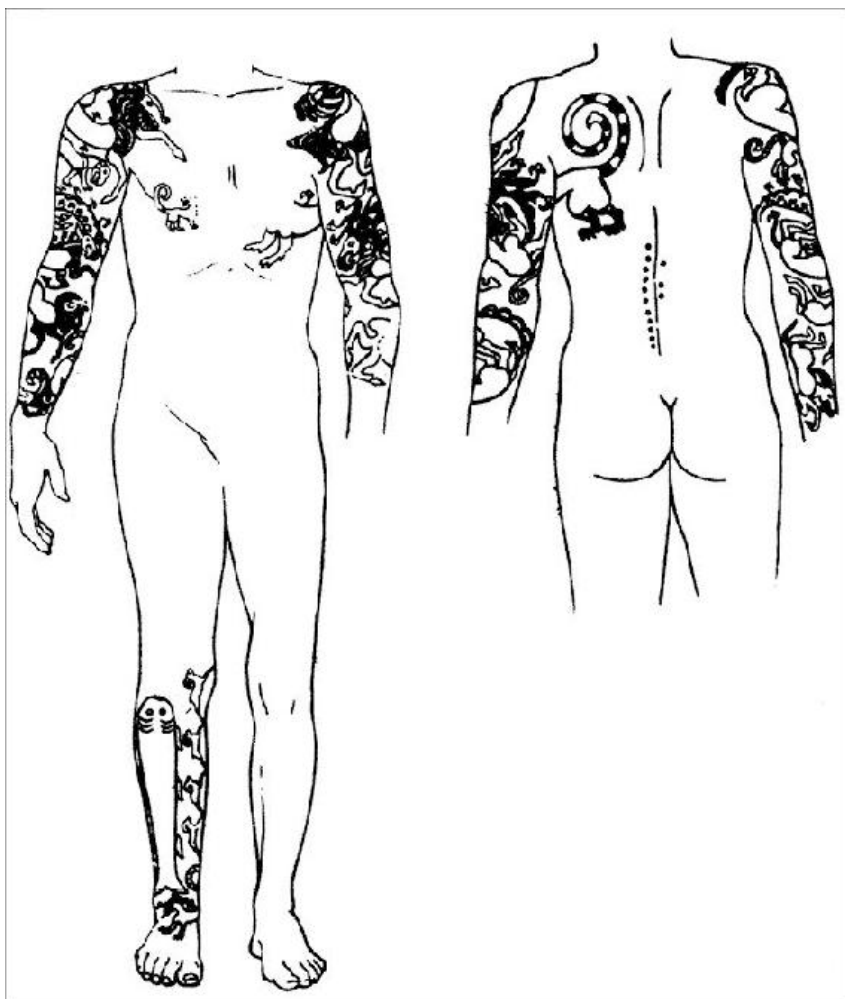
Whether Cyrus understood the true historical connection between these Sakas and the Turanians of the legends is uncertain. However, it seems clear that the Saka Tigrakhauda were the main nomadic horde to wreak havoc on the Iranian plateau during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Thus, Herodotus mentions the Apasiacae under the appellation Pausicae as residents of the Caspian Gates between Media and Parthia in his list of Darius I's tax districts.¹¹ He further counts the Dahae and Derbices among the nomadic tribes of Persia, presumably because Astyages had settled them there from Media.¹² It is true that Herodotus nowhere mentions the Massagetae as inhabitants of the Iranian plateau. But he states that the Massagetae initiated the wave of nomadic migrations that brought the Scythians to Iran and further provides that Darius included the Orthocorybantes, or "Wearers of the Upright Kyrbasia Hat" (Tigrakhauda), within the same tax district as Media proper. Scholars are somewhat uncertain as to the significance of this last detail. However, the simplest and most plausible explanation is that Herodotus' tax-list mentions those Saka Tigrakhauda who had settled in Median territory during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.¹³

Customs of the Saka Tigrakhauda

The Saka Tigrakhauda were a brave, warlike, and numerous people. The majority, including the Massagetae, Derbices, and Dahae, were pastoralists, who spent their days on horseback and their nights in tents or covered wagons. There, they drank kumis, or fermented mare's milk, and inhaled either cannabis or *haoma*, which they burned on small fires.¹⁴ A slightly higher level of civilization was attained by the Apasiacae, who settled in the marshy country to the east of the Aral Sea. Having adopted a quasi-sedentary existence, these Sakas compelled the sedentary populations in the areas they traversed to build them mud-brick structures that have been compared to Viking "long halls" and that presumably served as both banquet halls and communal residences.

A strong tradition of communal living certainly underlies Herodotus' report, ultimately derived from Persian sources, that each

man among the Massagetae married only one woman but had the right to sleep with his neighbor's wife, as long as he signaled his intention to do so by hanging his quiver outside the neighbor's tent. The same custom reportedly existed among the Tapurians, another nomadic tribe from northeastern Iran, as well as in parts of Hyrcania, in the northeastern corner of the Iranian plateau. However, the ancient Persians were generally protective of their women and often accused their enemies of holding their wives in common. So the reports of the Sakas' sexual promiscuity may have originated among Persians who wished to portray these nomads as lawless savages. To the extent the reports contain any truth, the basis may rest not in the treatment of wives but of female prisoners taken during raids. It has been supposed that the Massagetae, in contrast to the European Scythians, did not assert exclusive rights over such prisoners and possibly shared them.¹⁵



Line drawing of the tattoos decorating the body of a fourth or third century BCE nomadic chieftain discovered in a burial mound at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains near Mongolia. The animal designs seem to have been influenced by Scythian art. Although the ancient inhabitants of this region were probably distinct from the Scythians and Sakas in terms of ethnicity, they had extensive contacts with them, and we might imagine that some Scythian and Saka chieftains also had tattoos.

Another alleged custom of the Sakas that probably betrays the hostile feelings of the Persians concerns the practice of cannibalistic feasts, in which the nomads consumed the flesh of their dead relatives. Scholars are divided about whether or not to believe these reports. Archaeological finds and anthropological reports confirm the practice until relatively recently in other parts of the Eurasian steppe and Tibet, but no convincing evidence has yet been obtained from sites associated with the Saka Tigrakhauda.¹⁶

Religious Beliefs

The thirteenth *Yasht* of the Avesta contains a prayer, blessing the souls not just of pious Iranians but also of devout Turanians, Dahae, and other nomadic peoples. This would seem to suggest that some of the Saka Tigrakhauda had converted to Zoroastrianism before the Achaemenid period. However, these converts must have been very few in number, for in his Bisutun Inscription, Darius declares that the Saka Tigrakhauda were faithless for failing to venerate Ahuramazda.¹⁷

According to Herodotus, the Massagetae worshipped only the sun, to which they sacrificed horses, under the logic that the swiftest of animals belongs to the swiftest of gods.¹⁸ Most authorities identify the Massagetan sun god with Mithra, whom the Dahae and European Scythians also venerated. Although Mithra's paramount importance among the Sakas should not be discounted, he was probably the head of the pantheon rather than its sole member. Other deities that the Massagetae and their confederates likely honored included Haoma, the green-eyed god of the *haoma* plant who was a close affiliate of Mithra, and goddesses akin to the Iranian Anahita and so-called "Earth Mother."¹⁹

Judging by the customs of the European Scythians and the Arsacid rulers of the Parthian Empire, it would further appear that the

Saka Tigrakhauda deified their rulers and practiced a cult of ancestor worship.²⁰

Did the Saka Tigrakhauda Practice Matriarchy?

Various sources attest to the prevalence of matriarchal customs among the Sakas and other steppe nomads. According to Herodotus, the leader of the Massagetae in Cyrus' day was a queen named Tomyris, who reportedly came to power after her husband, the former king, had died. She is no doubt identical to the Thamyris mentioned by Polyaeus as one of the three Saka chieftains who opposed Darius I after the latter rose to power.²¹ The recurrence of her name in two separate sources might suggest that Tomyris was a historical personage, but the Bisutun Inscription, which provides a narrative of the same war recounted by Polyaeus, does not reference Tomyris or, for that matter, any other Saka queen; rather, the inscription mentions a male chieftain, named Skunkha, who was portrayed at Bisutun wearing the pointed, upright hat and a long beard. We may therefore wish to relegate Tomyris to the realm of legend, alongside Zarina, the adversary of Stryngaeus, and Sparethra, the wife of Amorges, the eponymous ruler of the Saka Haumavarga.[‡]

The tales of these belligerent queens, as well as those regarding the mythical tribe of the Amazons, who figured so prominently in classical Greek myth and art, were no doubt inspired by the high social standing that Saka and Scythian women enjoyed. The rigors of nomadic life evidently precluded the development of rigid gender roles among the steppe tribes, such that women could serve as priestesses or, even on occasion, soldiers. The Sarmatians, a people closely affiliated with the Massagetae, were particularly notorious for having female warriors, and it seems significant that a quarter of all known Scythian tombs belonging to females have been found to contain arms.²² Some scholars have inferred from this and other evidence that, among the steppe nomads, women were the true military equals of men. But this seems unlikely. Scythian and Saka women are not known to have fought in the armies of the Achaemenid kings, who regularly levied troops from among their nomadic neighbors. So the likelier scenario is that the usual military activity of these women was restricted to guarding their settlements while their men were away at war or on the hunt. The unpleasant experience of venturing too close to a seemingly unprotected nomadic encampment may have been what captured the Persians' imagination and ultimately spawned the legends of Tomyris and the other female

Ethnography of the Saka Tigrakhauda

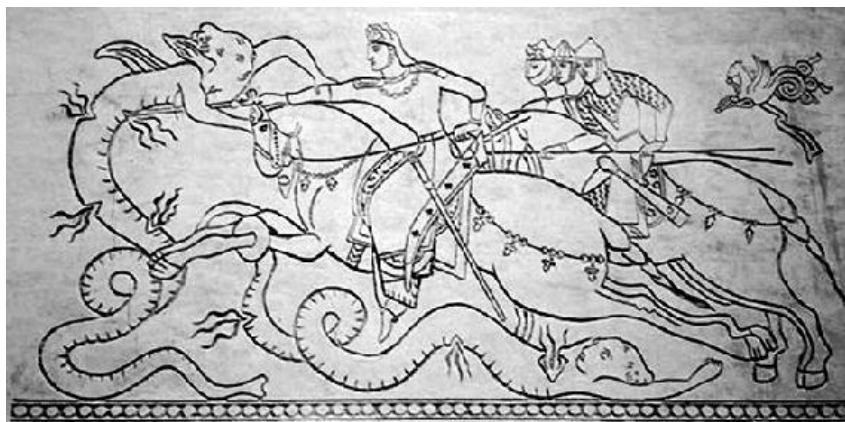
Whatever the truth about her historicity, the etymology of Tomyris' name deserves mention, as it raises additional questions about the ethnography of the Saka Tigrakhauda. The proposed Iranian form, **Tahma-rayish* means "Strong in Radiance."²⁴ However, another possible derivation is from Turkic and, as the feminine version of Tamerlane's name, connotes the "Iron Maiden."²⁵ It is an open question as to whether a clan of Turco-Mongolian descent could have infiltrated, much less ruled over, a vast Saka confederation at this early stage. The classical descriptions of the Alans, a nomadic people allegedly descended from the Massagetae, suggest that the latter possessed superlative Caucasian features: tall stature, blondish hair, and fierce eyes. This image is generally corroborated by the archaeological record; scientists have recovered the frost-preserved remains of numerous nomadic chieftains from inside their kurgans, or burial mounds, and these finds indicate that many of the northern nomads had light features and large frames, often measuring over six feet tall.



Relief from Persepolis showing a Saka tribute-bearer with Turco-Mongolian facial features.

But this rule had exceptions. As with the Persians during their trek to Parsa, the steppe nomads incorporated indigenous peoples and other wanderers into their tribal structure. Herodotus mentions the inclusion within the Massagetan tribal network of primitive natives known as the “Fish-Eaters” and may also have recorded the presence of Turco-Mongolian tribesmen among the Scythians in his account of the mysterious *Enarees*, a subsection of the Scythian population whose men lacked thick beards and body hair.²⁶ Archaeology has further shown that the Sakas were a wide-ranging people, with trade networks that extended deep into China. It is therefore unsurprising that some skulls uncovered from early Iron Age Saka burial sites in modern Kazakhstan display clear evidence of Mongoloid admixture.²⁷ That the vast majority of these skulls are female suggests that the ancient Saka lords placed a high premium on slave-girls with Asian features. So although most of the Sakas who marshaled against Cyrus in the sixth century BCE presumably fit the description of the Alans, some must have resembled the Tatar warriors who struck fear into the

hearts of the Europeans several thousand years later.



Reconstruction of an eighth century CE mural from the Sogdian city of Panjakent, showing Rostam and three knights attacking a pair of serpentine witches. The scene recalls Herodotus' account of the Scythian Heracles.

‡ See pages 36, 177.

Saka Epic Traditions

During the ancient period, different groups of Scythians, Sakas, and other steppe nomads settled from time to time in states established by the sedentary Iranians. These nomads were absorbed by the local population, which incorporated the legends and religious beliefs of the steppes into their own traditions. In this manner, the popular epics of the Scythians and Sakas attained prominence in Iranian literature. This contribution is most readily apparent in the case of Rostam, the greatest hero of the *Shahnameh*. Ferdowsi refers to Rostam as the *Sagzi*, or “Saka,” and presents him as the local ruler of Zabol and Sistan in southeastern Iran. Saka tribes inundated this region during the second century BCE, and their occupation caused the region formerly known as Drangiana to be termed *Sakastana*, the “Land of the Sakas,” from which the name “Sistan” derives. Ferdowsi’s Rostam combines the attributes of several legendary heroes, including the Avestan warrior Sama Keresaspa and the so-called “Scythian Heracles.”¹ Herodotus is our main source on the legend of the Scythian Heracles, and it is no stretch to see in Rostam’s brave yet violent and recalcitrant demeanor something of the heroic temperament of the steppe nomads.

According to Herodotus, certain steppe nomads claimed the Scythian Heracles as the progenitor of their nation, whereas others traced descent from the hero Targitaus.² Targitaus is said to have sired three sons, the youngest of whom founded the dynasty of the Paralatae, to which the Royal Scythians belonged. This Scythian legend has a close parallel in the Iranian myth regarding the origin of the nations. The version of this myth preserved in the *Shahnameh* concerns the children of Feraydun, a member of the Pishdadian dynasty (New Persian *Pishdadian* is a cognate of Avestan *Paradata* and Scythian *Paralata*, meaning the “Younger”).³ In this myth, Feraydun attains sovereignty over the whole world and begets three sons: Salm, Tur, and Iraj. Iraj is the youngest of the three and his father’s favorite.

So when the time comes to divide his estate, Feraydun gives Iraj the best part of his empire, the land of Iran, thus inciting the jealousy of Salm and Tur, who ruthlessly murder their younger brother. This fratricide becomes the cause of the interminable feud between the descendants of the three brothers – with the Sarmatians (descended from Salm) and Turanians (descended from Tur) on one side and the Iranians (descended from Iraj) on the other.

Like the biblical story of Cain and Abel, the Iranian myth serves to explain the fundamental difference between nomadic and agricultural peoples – that is, between the steppe and the sown. Playing on words, the myth validates the agricultural way of life by characterizing Iraj's descendants as “Aryan,” or “noble,” and the progeny of Salm and Tur as “covetous of wealth” and “recklessly brave.” By making Iraj the innocent victim of his brothers' aggression, the legend further underscores how those bound to the soil were at the mercy of free-booting nomads.³

§ See Appendices II and III on the possible existence of an archaic custom of ultimogeniture, or succession by the youngest son..

The Cyrus Legends and the Iranian Epics

They use as teachers their wisest men, who also interweave their teachings with the mythical element, thus reducing that element to a useful purpose, and rehearse both with song and without song the deeds both of the gods and of the noblest men.

—Strabo

Cyrus' place in the Iranian epics is a complicated and vexing matter.[¶] Ferdowsi does not mention Cyrus in the *Shahnameh*, and the Sasanids seemingly had no memory of him through local Persian traditions.¹ That the Iranians forgot the name of the greatest son of their nation is ironic.² Theories abound as to the reason for this glaring omission, but some of the main causes relate to the circumstances surrounding the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. The Macedonian destruction of Persepolis and other royal archives, as well as the phasing out of cuneiform as a means of written communication in Iran during the fourth century BCE, resulted in the loss of much historical information. This meant that, within only a few generations of the Macedonian conquest, the history of the early Achaemenid kings became accessible almost exclusively through folk tales, which were recounted orally and, therefore, were more prone to being changed or forgotten over time. The narratives of Cyrus' birth and upbringing transmitted by Herodotus and Ctesias represent prime examples of such quasi-legendary accounts.

That these so-called "Cyrus legends" or "sagas" go back to the time of the conqueror himself is exceedingly likely.³ Cyrus presumably disseminated these stories as propaganda to impress the Iranian common folk, who tended to think in mythical terms and were easily

swayed by fantastic tales.⁴ Indeed, both Herodotus and Xenophon report that Cyrus attempted to rally support from among the Medes and Persians by convincing them that he had been born and raised under supernatural conditions.⁵ It is therefore significant that the Cyrus legends seem to recall, to various degrees, the tales regarding certain heroes from the epics. At a glance, this is not surprising, for the stories of these heroes were in wide circulation long before the Achaemenid period, and Iranian oral literature was usually composed using popular narrative frameworks and motifs, with historical details constituting the final layer of literary embellishment.⁶ However, Adrian David Bivar has recently argued that the most important characters in the epics served as literary archetypes (for example, the pious king or the trusty advisor), so we may presume that the Cyrus legends were modeled after the tales of those archetypal heroes whose reputations the Persian founder wished to evoke.⁷

Because the legends were composed in this manner, the Persian conqueror's disappearance from the epics becomes less puzzling. The existence of recurring narratives could have resulted in the quasi-historical accounts of Cyrus becoming subsumed in the epic tales of the heroes with whom the Persian conqueror had associated himself. Contributing to this assimilation was the constant incorporation of historical information, through the use of allegories, into the epics themselves.⁸

The Legends of Cyrus and Sargon as an Example

A good example of how the assimilation of characters whose tales resembled each other could have resulted in the loss of genuine historical knowledge involves the apparent coalescence in popular Mesopotamian folklore of Cyrus and Sargon of Akkad (reigned 2334–2279 BCE).⁹ It has been observed that Ctesias' quasi-legendary tale of Cyrus' upbringing parallels the earlier Babylonian folk narrative of Sargon's childhood in certain respects.¹⁰ Specifically, in each story, the hero is the son of a mountaineer and ascends the throne after serving first as a gardener and then as a cupbearer to the king he would eventually overthrow. Robert Drews has convincingly argued that the Cyrus legend recounted by Ctesias was directed at an audience of both Persians and Babylonians. Specifically, the tale seems to have been adapted from a genuine Persian legend to incorporate portions of the story of Sargon's childhood. The intent was to legitimize Cyrus' rule over Mesopotamia, by presenting him as a second coming of Sargon, the archetypal good king in Babylonian and Assyrian literature. The actual consequence was to merge the

characters of Cyrus and Sargon in the popular imagination of the Babylonian masses, thereby precipitating the disappearance of the once famous Akkadian king from Mesopotamian folk history. A similar dynamic may have contributed to Cyrus' omission from the Iranian epics.

Cyrus and Thraetona

One of the legendary figures to which Cyrus attached himself was the hero Thraetona (New Persian *Feraydun*), who was famous in the Iranian epics for overthrowing the villainous Azhi Dahaka (*Zahhak*). The legend of Thraetona and Azhi Dahaka provided the framework against which the Iranians recounted major historical events since at least the eighth century BCE and seems to have evolved from an even earlier myth, in which Thraetona was a benevolent god and Azhi Dahaka a malevolent three-headed dragon.¹¹ Cyrus seems to have invoked the legend during his uprising against Astyages in 553–550 BCE.

This may be deduced from important similarities between Herodotus' story of Cyrus' origins – the earliest recorded example of a Cyrus legend – and the tale of Thraetona's struggle with Azhi Dahaka, as known from the Pahlavi sources and the *Shahnameh*.¹² Thus, both Astyages and Azhi Dahaka are made to reside in magnificent strongholds. Both villains receive forewarning of their demise at the hands of an unborn child in a dream and, on the strength of this dream, unsuccessfully attempt to capture the child, who hides among cattle-herders in a remote mountain-land. Each villain puts to death the son of an innocent man, who rallies opposition to the tyrant. In the Cyrus saga, the innocent man is Harpagus, whom Astyages tricks into eating the flesh of his son. In the *Shahnameh*, the innocent man is the blacksmith Kaveh, whose sons Azhi Dahaka kills to succor the snakes on his shoulders. Each legend further contains prominent Mithraic undertones. In the legend recounted by Ferdowsi, Feraydun (Thraetona) vanquishes Zahhak (Azhi Dahaka) by smiting him with an ox-headed mace (a weapon commonly identified with Mithra) and institutes the festival of Mithrakana to commemorate his victory. In Herodotus' narrative, the name of the cowherd who raises Cyrus is "Mitradates" (Old Iranian **Mithradata*), meaning "Created by Mithra." The cowherd's name doubtless served to remind listeners that Cyrus owed his salvation to the sun god.

In later sources, the connection between Cyrus and Thraetona becomes more explicit. The Syrian author Mar Apas Catinas (*circa*

second century CE) writes that the Azhi Dahaka of the Iranian epics represented the last Median king, and the Armenian historian Moses of Chorene knew Astyages as Bivarasp Asdahag (“Azhi Dahaka, the Master of a Myriad Horses”).** The epithet “Bivarasp” is entirely Mithraic and recalls the testimony of Ctesias, who had heard the Iranians refer to the last king of the Medes as Aspandas, meaning “Possessor of Horses.”¹³



Engraved Parthian gem depicting, on one side, Thraetona slaying a demon with donkey ears. The reverse, which was carved during Sasanid period, shows a dog or wolf with suckling pups. The story that Cyrus was nurtured by a she-dog features a common Indo-European motif that may have also appeared in earlier forms of the Thraetona legend.

Cyrus and Kavi Husravah

In his Sippar Cylinder, Nabonidus refers to Astyages as the personification of the “Umman Manda,” a Babylonian term for the various tribes of Medes, Scythians, and Sakas over which Astyages presided. In the Iranian epics, the embodiment of nomadic oppression is the Turanian enemy Frangrasyan. This villain is ultimately overthrown by the Iranian hero Kavi Husravah, who appears in the legendary history as the archetypal good ruler.¹⁴ In addition to extolling his defeat of the Turanian fiend, the Avesta praises Kavi Husravah as “the gallant hero who united all the Iranian nations into a single empire.”¹⁵ Because uniting the Iranian nations and vanquishing marauding nomadic hordes were two of Cyrus’ lasting achievements, we should expect some connection between the legendary accounts of his life and the epic stories of Kavi Husravah. According to the eleventh century CE scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni, who had surprising knowledge of the Achaemenids through non-Iranian sources, the two figures were identical.¹⁶

As memorialized in the *Shahnameh*, the story of Kavi Husravah’s birth and childhood closely tracks the account of Cyrus’ origins given by Herodotus, with the roles of Astyages, Cambyses, Mandane, Harpagus, and Cyrus played by Frangrasyan (New Persian *Afrasiyab*), Syavarshan (*Seyavash*), Frangrasyi (*Farangis*), Fryana (*Piran*), and Husravah (*Khosrow*), respectively. ¹⁷ The overall similarity between the two tales suggests some form of literary dependence, and other passages in the sources, summarized in the following table, seem to strengthen the case.

Kavi Husravah	Qay (Kay)	Khosrow
Sees the glowing fire of the flame and learns of kingship from these sacred divs affording thrice of thirty years (third).		¹⁸
attempt (Avestan legends).		¹⁹
Was known as Aghraeratha (signifying Aghraeratha)		²¹
Aghraeratha) in his youth (Srabab).		²⁰
Is the subject of a story performed by a mihan named		
Angas (Hingvada).		²³
Escapes Afrasiab's house on the way to Persia to lead the		
red Hamsa (the red horse) (Sakhsian).		²⁵
Near the dark pass of Mount Asraosha (a sacred		
fire) (Panhavutak) (light		²⁶
(Xenophon).		
Defeats Frangrasyan with Sakas (of Hama), then of the plant		
and the (a large deer) (Avesta).		²⁹
Lures the defeated Afrasiab out of hiding in the vases of his		
palace by a woman taking to bed his brother (Sakhsian).		³¹
Experiences a vision in which the angel Spirush forewarns him		
about his imminent demise (Spirush, Xenophon).		³²

As with the legend of Thraetona and Azhi Dahaka, the story of Kavi Husravah and Frangrasyan had developed from a primitive nature myth (this one involving the cycle of plant life) and provided the narrative structure according to which Iranian kings before Cyrus had recounted their deeds.³⁴

Cyrus and Kavi Vishtaspa

Although he was clearly a historical figure, Kavi Vishtaspa (New Persian *Kay Goshtasb*) had earned a hallowed place in the epics before

the Achaemenid period due to his patronage of the prophet Zoroaster. The identification of Cyrus with Kavi Vishtaspa is alluded to in the writings of the tenth century CE historian Tabari.³⁵ According to Tabari, Kavi Vishtaspa ordered the repatriation of the Jews and the reconstruction of Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem. For Mary Boyce and Ali Reza Shahbazi, this coalescence of personalities occurred long after the Achaemenid period, when Magian scholars interested in reconstructing Iran's pre-Hellenistic history mistook the spread of Zoroastrianism during Cyrus' reign, a fact remembered by the Babylonian priests they consulted, with the very advent of the Good Religion under Kavi Vishtaspa, the prophet's royal patron.³⁶ However, other scholars have suggested that the Achaemenid kings actively portrayed themselves as rulers in the mold of Kavi Vishtaspa, so it is not far-fetched to think that Cyrus was also presented in this way during his lifetime.³⁷

The Cyrus Legends and the Development of the Epics

An interesting question concerns the extent to which the Cyrus legends contributed to the development of the narratives found in the later forms of the epics, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. In the Avestan tales, which precede Cyrus by at most a few centuries, figures such as Thraetona and Kavi Husravah are characterized as demigods and not as kings, as they would be in the *Shahnameh* and other later texts. This transformation may have commenced during the Median period, when Iranian royal traditions first started to be institutionalized; however, the proliferation of quasi-legendary narratives involving Cyrus (and other Achaemenid kings) seems to have contributed to the process. Thus, the Avesta mentions both Kavi Husravah and Frangrasyan but, unlike the *Shahnameh*, never indicates that the former was the grandson of the latter. One may assume that the Husravah legend was revised to reflect the historical relationship between Cyrus and Astyages.³⁸ Finally, the epics' absorption of historical material may account for certain anachronistic information in the later texts. For example, several sources oddly describe Kavi Husravah as a great champion of Zoroastrianism, despite his preceding the prophet according to the Avesta and all other extant sources.³⁹ This confused chronology ostensibly reflects the identification of Kavi Husravah with a famous Zoroastrian king, perhaps Cyrus.

The Cyrus Legends as a Window into the Conqueror's

Personality

The earliest myths and legends typically depicted the heroes in a savage light and had them inflict brutal, violent punishments upon their foes. However, Cyrus clearly wished to be remembered as a humanitarian conqueror, for which reason the Cyrus legends exude a chivalrous tone and generally temper the violent details of the older epics. Thus, whereas the narrative frameworks of the Thraetona and Husravah legends require the hero to slay his adversary or imprison him in perpetuity, Cyrus spares Astyages and makes him an honored member of his entourage. Similarly, whereas in the Husravah legend the hero subjects Frangrasyan's kin to unspeakable torment in order to discern the villain's whereabouts, Cyrus merely threatens to torture Astyages' relatives to lure the Median king out of hiding.⁴⁰

The Influence of the Magi in Memorializing Persian History

Aside from the conflation between the Cyrus legends and the epics, another factor may have contributed to the Persian conqueror losing his place in Iranian history. By the second century CE, the Magi, who had not been the original priests of the Zoroastrian religion and whose indigenous beliefs inclined toward Mithraism, made a concerted effort to alter the historical traditions of Media and Persia. Their intent was to portray themselves as the original Zoroastrian priesthood, and as part of their historical whitewashing, the Magi renamed numerous western Iranian locales after places mentioned in the Avesta to create the impression that the prophet had been a native of their own homeland in Media.⁴¹ This geographical rebranding campaign presumably corresponded with a similar treatment of historical figures, and around the same time, certain Achaemenid kings obtained recognition as members of the same dynasty as Kavi Vishtaspa, the royal patron of the prophet Zoroaster.⁴² It is perhaps no coincidence that the only Achaemenids whose names the Magi preserved were Artaxerxes I and some of his descendants, who, unlike Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, had been unabashed supporters of the Magi and the worship of Mithra.[†] It seems that the Magi, who always guarded their ancestral rites, allowed the memory of these later kings to live on but were content to let the earlier (and, ironically, more successful) rulers of the Achaemenid dynasty lose their place in history to the epic heroes who played such an important role in Zoroastrian religious

Conclusion

During his lifetime, the Persian conqueror identified himself with various figures from the Iranian epics. In so doing, Cyrus acted no differently than other ancient conquerors, such as Alexander, whose attempts to portray himself as a new-age Achilles are well known. Just as Alexander imitated Achilles to solidify his reputation among the Greeks as a conqueror of Asiatic peoples, so too did Cyrus affiliate himself with various legendary characters to influence the manner in which his Iranian subjects regarded him. Thus, his affiliation with Thraetona signaled his liberation of the Persians from foreign oppression; his affiliation with Kavi Husravah marked his dedication to unifying the Iranians politically and protecting them against nomadic marauders; and his affiliation with Kavi Vishtaspa signified his patronage of Zoroastrianism. However, whereas the Greeks possessed a strong tradition of written literature, the Iranians did not, and so Cyrus' memory became subsumed by those of the heroes whose reputations he had evoked. It is nevertheless significant that distant echoes of Cyrus' accomplishments persist in the accounts of the legendary figures who subsumed his identity. Given the ancient Iranians' preference for oral history, Cyrus' apparent assimilation with these heroes, three of the most highly regarded in the epics, reflects a considerable measure of praise.

¶ The sources for the Iranian epics, or legendary history, are the Avesta (primarily the *Yashts*), the Pahlavi texts, and various New Persian and Arabic works from the Islamic period. The Islamic sources are the most detailed, and among them, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, written in New Persian, is by far the most important. Until the nineteenth century, Iranians viewed the *Shahnameh* as the main source on the ancient history of their country. But the *Shahnameh* was not the first book of its kind. Scholars generally agree that the Sasanids were the first Iranian dynasty to synthesize the ancient legends into a continuous, written narrative. This development occurred toward the end of the Sasanid period and resulted in the Pahlavi *Khwaday-Namag*, or "Book of Lords," one of the main forerunners of the *Shahnameh*. The *Khwaday-Namag* is now lost, though some of its contents are still discernible from the writings of early Islamic authors and the Pahlavi religious texts of the ninth and tenth centuries. Before the *Khwaday-namag* the legends were preserved orally and with local variations in different

regions of Iran.

** See page 150.

† See Appendix III.

Cyrus and Dhu'l-Qarnain

They ask thee (O Muhammad) concerning Dhu'l-Qarnain. Say, "I will tell you something of his story." Verily We established his power on earth, and We gave him the ways and the means to all ends.

—Quran

It is often overlooked that the period in which Cyrus lived was consequential for setting the stage for the rise of Islam during the seventh century CE. The faith preached by the prophet Muhammad basically involved an Abrahamic reform of the pagan Arabian religion, which featured a prominent cult of the moon god (to this day, Islam's symbol is the crescent moon). According to Sidney Smith, Nabonidus made the worship of the moon god endemic in southern Arabia, where Islam arose, and both Cyril Gadd and Charles Torrey have argued that the Babylonian king's army contained a sizable number of Jewish soldiers, many of whom stayed behind to garrison Tema and other Arabian cities.¹ These soldiers brought Judaism to Arabia, where it apparently thrived for centuries. The monotheistic beliefs of the Arabian Jews impressed Muhammad, who wished to reform the pagan religion of his own Arab tribesmen. Muhammad believed true monotheism to be the faith espoused by Abraham, and therefore, for many years after receiving his first revelation, Muhammad put great stock in obtaining the recognition of the Arabian Jews as a legitimate prophet.

Given these circumstances and the high opinion that the Babylonian Jews had of Cyrus, one might expect some reference to the Persian conqueror in the Quran. Such a reference may exist. The eighteenth surah, or chapter, of the Quran mentions an ancient king

named Dhu'l-Qarnain. The Quran does not specify Dhu'l-Qarnain's nationality; however, it tells of his sweeping conquests and magnanimity.² According to the Quran, one expedition took Dhu'l-Qarnain to the west, where he saw the sun set in a spring of murky water. A second campaign took him to the distant east, where he found people who lacked clothes or other protection against the sun. A third campaign took him to a mountainous region in the north, the inhabitants of which paid him tribute in return for his construction of a barrier to protect their lands from the devastating raids of Gog and Magog. Dhu'l-Qarnain built this barrier from iron and lead – a supernatural feat – and it was to remain in place until the end of days, when God would reduce it to dust.

Throughout the years, scholars have attempted to identify Dhu'l-Qarnain with various historical figures, including Alexander the Great, certain rulers of ancient Yemen, and even the prophet Moses. The key to these identifications rests in the etymology of Dhu'l-Qarnain's name, which means the "Two-Horned One." It is unclear whether the ancient Arabs interpreted the name literally to suggest that Dhu'l-Qarnain had horns growing from his head or figuratively to denote his dominion over a vast kingdom spanning the "two horns of the sun" (that is, the east and the west). Ancient and medieval folklore remembered both Alexander and Moses as having had horns. Moreover, Alexander was the ruler of a vast empire, as were the Himyarite kings of Yemen, who, according to erroneous popular history, achieved conquests as far afield as Samarkand. A number of these kings were Jewish and, like Dhu'l-Qarnain, had names beginning with the Arabic component *dhu*, or "two."

The connection to Alexander appears to be strong and is worthy of discussion, for it has received endorsement from several modern scholars.³ Having claimed to be the son of Zeus-Ammon, whose epithet was the "Horned God," the Macedonian conqueror minted coins depicting himself with ram's horns. Coins of this type circulated throughout the Ptolemaic period (323–31 BCE), and the argument has been made that the coins gave rise to the popular designation of Alexander as Dhu'l-Qarnain among various Near Eastern peoples. To be sure, there are numerous parallels between the Quran's account of Dhu'l-Qarnain and certain versions of the so-called "Alexander Romance"; this is the term used by scholars to denote any one of several collections of legends pertaining to Alexander that were in circulation from the early centuries of the common era into medieval times. Although the earliest extant form of the Alexander Romance is preserved in a Greek text of the second century CE, the versions that resemble the Quranic tale most closely are of uncertain date and seem to have been written after Muhammad's death.⁴

Because the Macedonian conqueror's personality was such that he became the subject of many fabulous stories, the legends comprising the Alexander Romance were constantly changing. This makes it difficult to discern which parallels to the Quranic tale of Dhu'l-Qarnain actually pre-existed Muhammad and which evolved later. Already in the second century CE, Flavius Josephus had heard about a massive wall built by the Macedonian conqueror as a bulwark against nomadic forays through the Caucasus Mountains, a region to which the historical Alexander never ventured.⁵ The construction of fortifications intended to obstruct the passage of the northern nomads – known in biblical and Islamic texts as Gog and Magog – figures prominently in the story of Dhu'l-Qarnain, so at a glance, Josephus' account appears to solidify the case for the latter's association with Alexander. However, the concept of a great northern barrier almost certainly predated Alexander, and a tenth or eleventh century CE Armenian historian had heard that the Caucasus fortifications were raised by the ancient Persian kings to keep the steppe nomads at bay until the moment of the "universal wrath."⁶ As this parallel to the story of Dhu'l-Qarnain suggests, the authors of the Alexander Romance and related stories may have ascribed to the Macedonian conqueror the noteworthy deeds or characteristics of other historical or quasi-historical personages, and this co-opting of attributes may have given the impression that Alexander and Dhu'l-Qarnain were one and the same person. Indirect support for this assumption derives from the fanciful tale that Alexander executed his barber for failing to keep the secret that the Macedonian conqueror had the ears of a donkey. The same story was told centuries before Alexander in connection with the Phrygian ruler Midas, "he of the golden touch," who appears on numerous Attic vases with the ears of an ass.⁷



In the ancient world, horns symbolized power. Detail of the four-winged guardian from Pasargadae. The figure dons an elaborate *hem-hem* crown, which consists of an ensemble of ostrich feathers and other adornments resting on a pair of ram's horns, and may represent Cyrus' *fravashi*, or "protective spirit."



Coin of the Macedonian ruler Lysimachus (reigned 306-281 BCE) showing Alexander with the horns of Zeus-Ammon.

It is thus possible to posit the existence, during Muhammad's lifetime, of various traditions concerning the identity of Dhu'l-Qarnain or, alternatively, to regard Dhu'l-Qarnain as a sort of legendary composite, who combined the attributes of several historical persons. In view of the foregoing, three points deserve attention: (1) the

Alexander Romance never refers to the Macedonian king as Dhu'l-Qarnain; (2) despite generally supporting Dhu'l-Qarnain's identification with Alexander, a number of medieval Moslem scholars had heard that the Quranic figure was a Persian ruler; and (3) Moslem historical traditions, or *hadiths*, relate that the Arabian Jews understood Dhu'l-Qarnain to have been mentioned in the Old Testament.



This first-millennium BCE Babylonian map, probably created between 750 and 500 BCE, presents an idealized depiction of the world as seen through Babylonian eyes. Mesopotamia lies at the center of the world and is ringed by a sea, beyond which are five remote regions, or *nagu*, denoted as triangles (perhaps a stylized representation of mountains). The *nagu* to the north contains a “Great Wall,” beyond which lies a land of darkness. Some of the idealized geographical notions contained in this map seem to have survived in the Quranic account of Dhu'l-Qarnain.

Now, the Old Testament refers to both Cyrus and Alexander, but only the former is clearly alluded to in connection with the term *Dhu'l Qarnain*. This parallel was first noted by the German Orientalist Gustav Redshob in the mid-nineteenth century. The pertinent reference occurs in the eighth chapter of the Book of Daniel, which was set in its

final form between 167 BCE and 163 BCE.⁸ The chapter recounts a dream that Daniel purportedly had before the Persian conquest of Babylon. In the vision, Daniel sees himself by the banks of the Ulai River (the present-day Karkheh) near Susa, the future capital of the Achaemenid Empire:

I looked up and saw a ram standing beside the river. It had two horns. Both horns were long, but one was longer than the other, and the longer one came up second. I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. All beasts were powerless to withstand it, and no one could rescue from its power; it did as it pleased and became strong.⁹

A second beast then arrived on the scene: “As I was watching, a male goat appeared from the west, coming across the face of the whole earth without touching the ground. The goat had a horn between its eyes. It came toward the ram with the two horns that I had seen standing beside the river, and it ran at it with savage forceIt threw the ram down to the ground and trampled upon it, and there was no one who could rescue the ram from its power. Then the male goat grew exceedingly great, but at the height of its power, the great horn was broken, and in its place there came up four prominent horns toward the four winds of heaven.”¹⁰

According to the story, the angel Gabriel imparted the meaning of the dream to Daniel. “The ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. The male goat is the King of Greece, and the great horn between its eyes is the first king [Alexander the Great]. As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power [the kingdoms of the Diadochi].”¹¹

The vision thus signifies the great events of history leading up to the “appointed time of the end.” The ram symbolizes the Achaemenid Empire, and its two horns – Hebrew *Lo Qarenaim*, the equivalent expression of Arabic *Dhu’l-Qarnain* – the unified kingdom of the Medes and Persians (with the latter nation, being the second to rise and the more dominant, represented by the longer horn).¹² The ram’s forays to the west, north, and south clearly allude to Cyrus’ wars of conquest, which established the territorial extent of the Achaemenid Empire, and seem to recall the three campaigns of Dhu’l-Qarnain recorded in the Quran.¹³ It is true that Daniel’s two-horned ram meets an inglorious fate, whereas the Quran provides no indication that Dhu’l-Qarnain suffered defeat. But as Elias Bickerman has explained, the final redaction of the Book of Daniel involved the reworking of genuine prophecies uttered at the time of Cyrus’ rise to reflect events

that transpired after the Persian conqueror's death and were of interest to the Jews.¹⁴ So it could be that the Arabian Jews had access to a legendary tradition based on an earlier version of the prophecy, closer in spirit to the unmodified original, in which the two-horned ram remained unconquered. Such versions of other stories contained in the Book of Daniel have been discovered among the Dead Sea scrolls.¹⁵

In assessing the significance of the apparent parallel between Dhu'l-Qarnain and the two-horned ram of Daniel's dream, it is important to note the overall influence that the tales underlying the Book of Daniel seem to have had upon the origins of Islam. Although Daniel's name does not appear in the Quran, many elements of Islamic theology are directly traceable to concepts prominent in the biblical book attributed to him. These include the Quran's emphasis upon apocalyptic imagery; the importance of the arch-angels Gabriel and Michael, both of whom are introduced to the Bible in the Book of Daniel; Gabriel's role as the angel of revelation (Moslems believe that Gabriel recited the Quran to Muhammad); and the notion of a final revelation to mankind to be delivered by the "seal of the prophets."¹⁶ Indeed, the Book of Daniel appears to have had a greater impact upon early Islamic theology than any other biblical book.

In highlighting the importance of the Book of Daniel, my intention is to show that elements of early tales relating to the Persian conqueror could have formed part of the basis for the story found in the Quran. It is not to present a definitive proof that Dhu'l-Qarnain was Cyrus. Indeed, it is clear that, even at the time of Muhammad, Dhu'l-Qarnain was a mysterious and problematic figure. The Quran mentions Dhu'l-Qarnain in connection with a question that the prophet's opponents planned to pose in hopes of demonstrating that Muhammad lacked sublime knowledge. Specifically, Muhammad's adversaries wished to demonstrate that the prophet did not know the truth about Dhu'l-Qarnain. Such an inquiry only makes sense if Dhu'l-Qarnain was already a controversial figure. Given the fluidity with which legends changed in ancient times, the true origins of Dhu'l-Qarnain were probably obscured by the seventh century CE, and this might explain why Muhammad was circumspect, and in some regards perhaps even non-committal, in describing him. It is possible that the prophet equated Dhu'l-Qarnain with some ancient king of Yemen, Alexander, or someone else entirely. We will likely never know for sure.

What is clear is that the putative identification of Cyrus with Dhu'l-Qarnain has gained sway in modern Iran. This is mostly due to the writings of Mowlana Abol Kalam Azad during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Although Azad deserves credit for

acquainting himself with the earlier research of Redslob, other aspects of his thesis seem naïve.¹⁷ Be this as it may, the trendy identification of Cyrus with Dhu'l-Qarnain in present-day Iran has preserved the sanctity of the Persian founder within the Islamic Republic. When I visited Pasargadae in September 2011, as we approached our destination, I was surprised to see interspersed among the billboards and gift shops mentioning Cyrus and the first Achaemenid capital a few signs that purported to show the way to Dhu'l-Qarnain's palace.

The Achaemenid King as Universal Savior

According to Zoroastrian belief, Ahuramazda created the cosmos in a pristine condition at the beginning of time, but Angra Mainyu and his minions contaminated the universe thereafter through the introduction of death, disease, deceit, sorrow, and noxious creatures. The saga of the creation was the most important myth in ancient Zoroastrianism. Marijan Molé has demonstrated that the fundamental purpose of practically every Zoroastrian ritual was to re-enact on a microcosmic scale Ahuramazda's creation of the universe.¹ As Molé understood, the tremendous significance of the creation myth resulted in a similar emphasis on the doctrine of an apocalypse. The Zoroastrians believed that, at the end of time, the universe would undergo a process known as the Great Renovation that would restore the cosmos to its original pure state. The concepts of creation and renovation were intertwined in Zoroastrian thought, inasmuch as the latter marked the natural conclusion to the cosmic cycle initiated by the former. Indeed, the whole purpose of the creation was to lure Angra Mainyu and the Daivas from the unassailable realm of darkness into the Material World, where they could be destroyed.²

Zoroaster himself seems to have believed that the Great Renovation was close at hand. The word *saoshyant* – literally, the “one who shall save” – appears six times in the Gathas in connection with the agents of the final victory of good over evil. The attested uses are somewhat inconsistent with one another.³ In one passage, Zoroaster describes himself as a *saoshyant*; elsewhere, he uses the term in connection with his followers, thus implying that the community of believers would save humanity. These references underscore the prophet's early hope that the final eradication of evil would occur in his own lifetime or soon thereafter. But Zoroaster seems to have eventually adopted the view that the Great Restoration would take

place many years later and that it would be heralded by a future patron of his religion who would complete the prophet's work.⁴ The Zoroastrians knew this future patron as "Astvat-ereta" ("He Who Embodies Righteousness"), more famously invoked as the savior *par excellence* – that is, the "Saoshyant."

The doctrine of the Saoshyant became greatly embellished in the Young Avestan period. Texts composed during and after this epoch portray the Saoshyant as the son of a virgin mother, immaculately impregnated with Zoroaster's seed upon wading into the shallows of Lake Hamun in Sistan. The Pahlavi literature further describes the Saoshyant as the last of three great heroes – each conceived in the same manner – who would battle Angra Mainyu and the followers of the Lie following a major calamity during the final three-thousand years of cosmic history. Given the prominence ascribed to the Hamun Lake, we may surmise that the more elaborate version of the Saoshyant myth originated among the Zoroastrian community of ancient Sistan. The embellished myth probably did not become mainstream in other parts of Iran until the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–359 BCE), who appears to have integrated various Zoroastrian and pagan traditions into the state religion of the Achaemenid Empire. Artaxerxes' predecessors may therefore have espoused the simpler, Gathic form of the salvation doctrine.

That the early Achaemenids made use of the Saoshyant myth in their propaganda has been demonstrated by Peter Kingsley. Specifically, Kingsley has analyzed a fragment of the lost history of Xanthus of Lydia, a contemporary of Herodotus who recorded that Zoroaster had lived six thousand years before Xerxes I crossed the Hellespont in 480 BCE.⁵ The six-thousand-year period is extremely important in Zoroastrian religious chronology. As developed by the Magi in Achaemenid times, this chronology held that Ahuramazda created, or introduced into the Material World, Zoroaster's soul six thousand years before the Great Renovation. Because Zoroaster himself had foretold that a massive battle would precede the apocalypse, Kingsley reasoned that the Magi must have used the occasion of Xerxes' military effort against the Greeks to invoke the prophecy of the Great Renovation for purposes of rallying support for their overlord in this critical enterprise. Although Kingsley's article does not expressly mention the Saoshyant, one may reasonably conclude from his argument that Xerxes' propagandists portrayed the Achaemenid king either as the Saoshyant himself or as his forerunner; this, in fact, was the argument made by Strouve.⁶

Now, propaganda of the sort employed by the Magi would have been effective only if the underlying myth was well known. On this basis alone it is reasonable to suppose that Zoroastrian Persians before

Xerxes were attuned to the legend of the Saoshyant and, perhaps, anxious for his arrival. Did Cyrus make soteriological claims in his own propaganda? Direct evidence is lacking. But Bruce Lincoln has interpreted the repeated invocation of the creation myth in Darius I's inscriptions as evidence that this king presented himself as the restorer of the original cosmic order. Similar claims abound in Second Isaiah's compositions, which indicate that Cyrus, too, claimed to receive divine support from the "God of Creation" in his propaganda (see pages 241–242 and Appendix XI).⁷

It is even possible that the Cyrus Cylinder contains evidence of the Zoroastrian salvation doctrine tailored to fit Babylonian religious beliefs. The Babylonians situated the great battle between good and evil not at the end of time but at its beginning, when Marduk defeated the sea monster Tiamat to establish order out of chaos. In this connection, the Cylinder inscription's statement that Cyrus "saved Babylon from hardship" has been determined to constitute "a thinly-veiled reference" to a verse from the Babylonian creation epic that "sums up the defeat of Tiamat . . . the creation of the world . . . and the building of Babylon."⁸ The implication is that the authors of the Cyrus Cylinder cast the Persian conquest of Babylon "as the moment of ultimate restoration . . . of the cosmic order" and "as the final act in the cosmic drama, which, to Babylonian readers, guaranteed the very existence of their universe."⁹ The restoration of divinely-created order as a final historical event recalls the Zoroastrian doctrine of the Great Renovation, which takes place at the end of time and signifies the ultimate victory of good over evil.

In light of the above, one may cautiously conclude that beginning with Cyrus the Achaemenid kings espoused an ideology in which they assumed an important role in heralding the Great Renovation. The existence of such an ideology has many implications. Most importantly, it suggests a millenarian dimension to Achaemenid rule that has hitherto gone largely unrecognized. Over three decades ago, Dieter Metzler proposed that Persian ideologues developed for Cyrus a historiography of three successive universal monarchies – the Assyrian, Median, and Persian Empires – which would dominate human history until the end of time.¹⁰ Various biblical and classical texts allude to this scheme, the basic tenet of which was that each succeeding empire should improve upon the work of its predecessor, with the Persian Empire constituting the perfect state that would rule the world forever.¹¹

The "Royal Hero" Redefined

Certain sculptures at Persepolis may constitute further evidence for the existence of salvation propaganda under the Achaemenids. These reliefs show a male figure, commonly referred to as the “Royal Hero,” vanquishing real and mythical creatures. Various scholars have identified the Royal Hero as Ahuramazda, the Achaemenid king, the archetypal Persian warrior, or the Avestan hero Sama Keresaspa, one of the prototypes for Ferdowsi’s Rostam.¹² Although combat scenes of this type have precursors in Mesopotamian art going back to the earliest times, the Persians are likely to have interpreted them through the lens of their own mythology.¹³ Not only do the monsters at Persepolis symbolize cosmic concepts associated with time, but they also bear an uncanny resemblance to the depictions of Angra Mainyu and the Daivas in later Iranian art.¹⁴ In Zoroastrianism, the great battle between these demons and the forces of good occurs not at the beginning of time but at its end. I would therefore contend that, at least at Persepolis, the Royal Hero depicts the Saoshyant or, better yet, the Achaemenid king in the role of the Saoshyant.¹⁵



Bas-relief from Persepolis depicting the Royal Hero battling a composite beast. According to Gernot Windfuhr, the battle symbolizes the Achaemenid king as the lord of time. The beast's bull horns signify the zodiacal sign Taurus; its lion body signifies Leo; and its scorpion tail, wings, and talons signify Scorpio; the Hero signifies Aquarius. Composite beasts of this sort also represented Angra Mainyu in Iranian art and literature. For example, in his *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadim quotes the third century CE prophet Mani as describing the Devil with the head of a lion, body of a dragon,

wings of an eagle, feet of a cow, and tail of a great fish.



A sixteenth-century miniature painting showing the epic hero Hushang slaying a lion-headed Daiva. Like the Royal Hero, Hushang grasps the Daiva's horn. Compare the demons shown here to the lion-headed figures on page 459.

This interpretation accords with my proposed explanation of another important scene at Persepolis. As scholars have noted, the reliefs involving the Royal Hero appear as a counterpoint to those depicting a lion attacking a bull. Although both lion and bull were longstanding symbols of Near Eastern kingship, the precise meaning of the sculptures represents something of a mystery. However, because the imperial artistic program generally reinforced themes emphasized in the royal inscriptions, the thinking here is that the lion and bull motif was at least partly intended to recall the Iranian creation myth. A prominent feature of this myth was the killing of the primordial bull, a deed attributed to Mithra by his devotees but to Angra Mainyu by Zoroastrians. In western Iran, both Angra Mainyu and, in his destructive capacity, Mithra had as their avatars the lion. This iconographic feature presumably owed to the influence of the Mesopotamian deity Nergal, and at Persepolis, the lion pins the bull in much the same manner that the anthropomorphic sun god leaps upon the sacrificial beast in Roman Mithraic depictions of the tauroctony. By initiating the cycle of life and death, the sacrifice of the primordial bull was believed to establish the cosmic order that would last until the end of time, when another bull sacrifice would occur. Mithraists maintained that this second bull sacrifice (performed by Mithra) would herald the immortal existence destined for those elite members of society initiated into the god's cult, whereas Zoroastrians believed

that the Saoshyant would perform this second offering to mark the commencement of the Great Renovation. Because the Iranians likened the Great Renovation to the regeneration of plant and animal life observed each spring, the Persepolitan scene has been interpreted to connote the rise of Leo and corresponding fall of Taurus at the spring equinox. But in my estimation, the lion and bull motif also signified, more broadly, the Achaemenid king's role in establishing order throughout the world, as at the creation; it may also have symbolized universal rebirth through divinely mandated political rule.

The Book of Daniel as a Reflection of Achaemenid Soteriological Propaganda

This interpretation of the Persepolis reliefs further elucidates the apparent connection noted by earlier scholars between these sculptures and the apocalyptic imagery in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel.¹⁶ The Book of Daniel was redacted into its final form around 167–163 BCE in Palestine, approximately a century and a half after the overthrow of the Persian Empire. However, many of the original stories on which the final redaction was based were written in Achaemenid Babylonia. Daniel reveals the greatest Persian influence of any biblical book and contains a number of Persian loanwords. Particularly important is the adoption of the Persian word **raza*, or “mystery,” which is used in both the Avesta and the Book of Daniel to denote the secrets that God reveals at the apocalypse.

The seventh chapter of the book describes the coming of the Son of Man, the Jewish Savior, within the context of a vision, in which Daniel sees four beasts rising sequentially from the sea. The first three are a lion standing on its hind legs, a grotesque bear, and a leopard with multiple heads and wings. An upright lion grapples with the Royal Hero in bas-relief on one of the door-jambs of the Hall of a Hundred Columns at Persepolis. Because Achaemenid imperial art was entirely stereotyped, the same scene was presumably replicated in the royal palace at Babylon, where the original authors of the text could have seen it. In Mesopotamian astrology, the lion, bear, and leopard represented Babylonia, Media, and Persia, respectively, and this identification is alluded to in the text; the same animals further served as astronomical symbols, the appearance of which marked the passage of time.¹⁷

The fourth beast is unlike any known creature and signifies the Hellenistic Empires, which were intrinsically different from the three Near Eastern kingdoms. The sequence of empires presented in the

final redaction of the biblical book represents a later Jewish expansion off the three-kingdom scheme devised for Cyrus. Within this adaptation, Assyria was replaced by Babylonia, the dominion of which left a greater impression on the Jews. And the violent Macedonian conquest of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BCE precipitated the need for a fourth kingdom, utterly evil, to be overthrown at the apocalypse.¹⁸

The relationship between Daniel's beasts, the Persepolis reliefs, and Zoroastrian eschatological concepts (as adapted in Achaemenid ideology) suggests that the next series of visions was inspired by Iranian religious beliefs, as well as, perhaps, a scene witnessed at the Persian court:

As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and his wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him; thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.¹⁹

The Ancient of Days is God the Father, who presides over the trial of the four beasts. The river of fire emanating from his throne recalls the molten stream that Zoroastrians believed would flow from the mountains at the apocalypse, and the blazing wheels the halos that symbolize the Glory, or *Farnah*, of the enthroned deity.²⁰ The reference to the deity's thousands of attendants and myriads of ministers reflects not only "the Iranian way of counting" but the One thousand Apple-Bearers and Ten Thousand Immortals of the Persian king.²¹ These soldiers are shown waiting upon the king in many reliefs at Persepolis. Based on this evidence, it has been concluded that the biblical scene was modeled after "a sitting of the court of appeal in the presence of the Great King."²²

The passage proceeds with the Ancient of Days sparing the first three beasts but committing the fourth, the representation of the Hellenistic Empires, into the river of fire, which consumes it. Daniel's dream continues:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped

him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.²³

The one like the Son of Man is the Messiah, now conceived of as the Savior. His appearance in angelic form recalls the Zoroastrian belief that the Saoshyant's soul would reside in heaven until the moment of his birth.²⁴ The Son of Man receives his investiture from the Ancient of Days in the manner of a Persian crown prince.²⁵ The receipt of "authority, glory, and sovereign power," represents a traditional Persian formula that appears frequently in Pahlavi texts and the *Shahnameh*. "Dominion over all peoples, nations and men of every language" reflects the Persian title, *khshayathiya dahyunam vispazananam*, "King of the Lands Containing All Kinds of Men," which the Akkadian versions of the royal inscriptions translate as "King of the Lands Containing Men of All Tongues." Immortal dominion is yet another Persian concept, inherent in the standard greeting to the monarch, "O King, may you live forever!"²⁶

According to Ernst Herzfeld and other scholars, the authors of the Book of Daniel derived inspiration for this passage from a famous Iranian scene, best known from a bas-relief discovered at Persepolis.²⁷ In the relief, the king sits upon his golden throne elevated upon a dais supported by representatives from the subject nations; his right hand grasps the royal scepter and his left a lotus blossom, symbol of immortality. Behind him stands the crown prince, sporting the long beard of royalty and wearing the same tall crown as his father.²⁸ He, too, holds a lotus blossom in his left hand and with his right hand touches the royal throne, thus signifying his right of inheritance and receipt of royal prerogatives. The portrayal of the enthroned monarch and invested crown prince was a popular subject of Persian royal art and an enduring icon of Achaemenid power.



Relief from Persepolis showing Darius I enthroned with Xerxes I standing behind him. Xerxes touches the throne with his right hand to signify his position as crown prince. The throne platform is supported by representatives of the subject nations, containing “Men of All Tongues.”

Eschatological Propaganda within the Long View of Iranian History

The Achaemenids’ use of eschatological propaganda has antecedents in later Iranian history, as certain dynasties are known to have arisen during periods of heightened millenarian thought. Specifically, a millenarian mood seems to have existed under the

Sasanid king Ardashir I, whose subjects braced themselves for the precise day on which an apocalyptic event would occur. It was to allay their agitation that Ardashir instituted a calendar reform pursuant to which his theologians contrived a later date for Zoroaster's birth and ministry in order to delay the apocalypse by several centuries.²⁹ But the best known example of Iranian millenarianism involves the Safavid state, which was founded by Shah Ismail I, who claimed to be the living emanation of the Twelfth Shiite Imam, or Mahdi, the Islamic version of the Saoshyant. From the Achaemenids to the Sasanids to the Safavids and even to the present day, there is a timeless quality to the Iranian world view.

ENDNOTES

Prologue

- 1 See Toynbee (1963a), 580.
- 2 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.1.4, translated by Dakyns.
- 3 Aeschylus *The Persians* 768–772, translated by Potter.
- 4 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.1.5, translated by Dakyns.
- 5 Isaiah 60:1–5, Greek version, as translated in Burn (1962), 57.
- 6 Herodotus 3.89.
- 7 This is the translation of the Persian royal title *Khshayathiya Dahyunam Vispazanam*.
- 8 Consider the relatively recent assessment of the eminent classicist Peter Green (1996), 5: “Modern Europe owes nothing to the Achaemenids. We may admire their imposing if oppressive architecture, and gaze in something like awe – from prostration level, as it were – at the great *apadana* of Persepolis, with its marvelous bas-reliefs. Yet the civilization which could produce such things is almost as alien to us as that of the Aztecs, and not for dissimilar reasons.”

A Note on the Major Sources

- 1 The most important of these records are the so-called Babylonian Chronicle, the Cyrus Cylinder, the Verse Account of Nabonidus, and the Dynastic Prophecy. These texts are reproduced in their entirety with annotations in Appendices VI, VII, VIII, IX respectively.
- 2 In Greek mythology, the Muses were the goddesses of artistic inspiration and the source of literary knowledge.

- 3 Herodotus' account of Cyrus' rise to power forms part of a lengthy discussion on Median history, which Herodotus probably derived secondhand from a scion of the Median nobleman Harpagus, whom the historian credits for much of Cyrus' early success and whose descendants held fiefdoms in southwestern Asia Minor, near Halicarnassus; see Cook (1983), 18, and (1985), 203. Other information concerning Cyrus likely stemmed from the descendants of two Persian noblemen who were contemporaries of the Achaemenid founder: Otanes, son of Pharnaspes, and Megabyzus, son of Datuvahya. The former was Cyrus' brother-in-law and a member of the Achaemenid clan, the latter a high-ranking officer stationed in Syria. Individuals acquainted with the descendants of these men presumably informed Herodotus about Cyrus' family affairs, his reputation among the Persians, and the circumstances of his final campaign, including his dream about Darius. For a good general overview of Herodotus' historical method, see Drews (1973), 45–96.
4. Herodotus' debt to Hecataeus is acknowledged by numerous ancient and modern authorities. For specific discussions regarding his impact upon Herodotus' knowledge of the Persians and other Iranian peoples, see Herzfeld (1968), 7, 100, 288; Henning (1951), 42–43. A work attributed to the Carian navigator was written during the second half of the fourth century BCE by an anonymous author known to modern scholars as Pseudo-Scylax. Pseudo-Scylax presumably drew upon the *Periplus* of the actual Scylax, which is now lost; Herzfeld (1947), 660–662. Other early authors of Persian histories whose works Herodotus likely consulted were Hellanicus of Mytilene and Charon of Lampsacus, both of whom flourished during the fifth century BCE. Plutarch (*On the Malice of Herodotus* § 20) cites Charon as a better authority than Herodotus regarding certain details of the Persian conquest of Asia Minor, and Herodotus may have obtained his information regarding Cyrus' nurture by a dog from Charon's history. The works of Charon and Hellanicus are now lost, as are the Persian histories of Dionysius of Miletus, upon whom both Herodotus and Xenophon likely drew; see Dandamaev (1989), 86, footnote 8. The poet Simonides of Ceos (lived 556–468 BCE) composed several poems on the Persian Wars, as well as one entitled *The Kingdoms of Cambyzes and Darius*, which Herodotus may have used as a source on early Iranian history.
- 5 See Herodotus 1.1. Also Drews (1973), 69–77.
- 6 See Diodorus Siculus 2.32.4.
- 7 The quotation is from the proem to the Epitome of Photius. See also Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Ctesias."
- 8 For example, Ctesias (*Indica*, Epitome of Photius § 9) claims to have

personally witnessed Artaxerxes II conjure up rain by invoking the gods with his magical sword. He also claims to have personally seen a *martichora* (from the Persian word for “man-eater”), a tiger-like monster with a human head, multiple rows of teeth, and a scorpion tail; see *Indica*, Epitome of Photius § 15; Aelian *On Animals* 4.21. Herodotus, too, offers descriptions of fantastic beasts but, unlike Ctesias, never claims to have seen them; see Burn (1962), 29–30.

- 9 Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 1, translated by Dryden.
- 10 These would include his accounts of Astyages’ invasion of the Persian homeland, an episode mentioned in the Babylonian inscriptions but completely overlooked by Herodotus, and Cyrus’ final campaign against the steppe nomads. Unlike Herodotus, who imagined Cyrus’ body falling into the hands of his nomadic opponents, Ctesias understood that Cyrus was buried at Pasargadae. Ctesias’ statement that Cambyses II assassinated his brother Bardiya before invading Egypt in 525 BCE also agrees with the Bisutun Inscription of Darius I, whereas Herodotus incorrectly has Cambyses put Bardiya to death after occupying Egypt.
- 12 Consider Herodotus’ discussion (3.133–3.134) of the harem intrigue that resulted in Democedes’ mission to reconnoiter Greece, as well as his later account (9.108–9.113) of a Bactrian revolt against Xerxes I.
- 13 See Cook (1983), 21–22; Malloy (1985), 396; Drews (1973), 106–107; Herzfeld (1947), 48, 50. Ctesias himself claimed to have obtained some of the information for the *Persica* from Parysatis, the principal queen of Darius II; see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 52.
- 14 See Herzfeld (1947), 717; Drews (1973), 111–112, and (1974). Also S. Smith (1944), 31.
- 15 Cicero *Epistulae ad Quintum Fratrem* 1.1.23.
- 16 See Diogenes Laertius 6.1.16.
- 17 See S. Smith (1944), 30–31; S. Parpola (2003). Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1985) makes the case for Xenophon having faithfully followed Iranian sources in recounting Cyrus’ deathbed speech (*Cyropaedia* 8.7.1–8.7.8).
- 18 Consider that, whereas Ctesias makes Cyrus the son of a pauper who miraculously worked his way up to being Astyages’ cupbearer, Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.8–1.3.14) has the young Cyrus amuse his Median grandfather by imitating his cupbearer for a day.
- 19 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 3.4.7, 3.4.10.

Chapter One

A Nascent People: The Arrival of the Medes and Persians in Western Iran

- 1 The transition from priests to warriors is my own inference based on the changed meaning of the Avestan term *Kavi*. Specifically, this term once meant “seer” or “poet-sacrificer” (the person who chants hymns during a sacrifice) but was later changed to mean “king.” See Skjaervo (1995), 169–171; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Goštāsp.”
- 2 For the cultural peculiarities of the Old and Young Avestan periods, see Skjaervo (1995), 167–171.
- 3 Drews (2004) dates this development to about 1000 BCE. Kuz'mina (2007), 140, and Frye (1984), 39, suggest slightly earlier dates of about 1200 BCE and 1500 BCE, respectively, for the popularization of mounted warfare among the Indo-Iranians. Anthony (2007), 221–239, cites evidence of primitive cavalry in the Eurasian steppes as far back as the fourth millennium BCE.
- 4 Certain scholars, especially those dedicated to the study of ancient Elam, oppose the notion of a violent Iranian migration and argue for a peaceful coexistence of Iranian and native societies. The subsequent history of the Iranian plateau lacks such examples. Accordingly, I prefer the view of Herzfeld (1947), 696, that the later influxes of nomadic tribes from Central Asia offer the best analogies to the Iranian migration. Indeed, ancient Indian epics such as the *Mahabharatas* have been interpreted to relate the wars fought against incoming Iranian tribes by the settled Indo-Aryan population of eastern Afghanistan. Waters (1999) also acknowledges the likelihood of a violent Persian takeover in parts of southwestern Iran. Frye (1996), 41–42, discusses the general propensity of nomads to first defeat a tribe and then join forces with it.
- 5 See *Yasht* 9.4, 19.6. The names Mazana and Varena were originally applied to lands in the Hindu Kush but later given also to Mazandaran and Gilan north of the Alborz.
- 6 Ghirshman (1964), 76.
- 7 For the theory of a wide-ranging, pre-Iranian nation of Caspians, see Herzfeld (1941), 181–183; Harmatta (1992). According to Harmatta, the name by which the Iranians knew this people was **Kasva*. For the likely etymological connection between the names of the Kassites, Cossaeans, Caspian Sea, Kashan, and Qazvin, see Ghirshman (1964), 65; Herzfeld (1968), 195–196, 199, 321.
- 8 See Diakonoff (1985a), 3. Even today the inhabitants of Khuzestan and the areas along the Persian Gulf coast are darker skinned than

- other Iranians.
- 9 *Videvdta* 3.31, adapted from the translation of Schwartz (1985a), 662.
- 10 See Skjaervo (1995), 167–171.
- 11 The farming community constituted the basic form of urban settlement among the early Iranians. Notwithstanding certain exceptions, it took many centuries for the Iranians to live in crowded cities such as those found in Mesopotamia in which palaces, temples, marketplaces, and residential neighborhoods were all enclosed by a perimeter wall. The Iranians' hesitance in this regard doubtless stemmed from their nomadic origins, which led them to favor relatively isolated residential areas spread across vast distances. According to Herzfeld (1941), 222–225, the true Iranian urban plan called for a fortress situated atop a hill or other position of natural strength, surrounded by isolated houses in the plain below.
- 12 See most notably *Yasht* 10.70–10.72.
- 13 The Black Obelisk Inscription is famous because it confirms the biblical story of King Jehu, who is shown kissing Shalmaneser's feet.
- 14 The connotation of “warrior” or “hero” may derive from the Old Iranian cognate of Sanskrit *pareshu* meaning “battle-ax,” used in ethnic names to denote a “battle-ax people”; see Frye (1963), 46, 66. Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 4, cite Grantovsky's etymology of “wide-chested.” Skalmowski (1995), 311–312, defines “Parsa” to mean the “vanguard,” as in the tribes at the forefront of the Aryan migration. Compare to Old Persian *Parthava*, “Parthian,” which later became Middle Persian *pahlava* and New Persian *pahlavan*, “champion” or “hero,” possibly through an intermediary **parthava-pana* (“guardian of the distant settled lands”). This definition of the Parthian ethnic name is often held to have originated in the Arsacid period, when a tradition of knighthood evolved in Iran. For a non-Iranian etymology of “Parsa” based on Sumerian *Parahse*, meaning “Land of Horses,” see Herzfeld (1968), 181–82, 184–86. However, Herzfeld's etymology does not account for similar eastern Iranian tribal names, such as those of the Parthians and Pashtuns. See Diakonoff (1985b), 64, and Skjaervo (1995), 156, for the theory that “Parsa,” “Parthava,” and related ethnicons derived from Old Iranian **parasu* (Avestan *paresu*), meaning “rib” or “lateral,” to connote a frontier-land, more specifically, of the Median kingdom; however, this theory overestimates the importance of the Medes, who did not form a kingdom until the mid-seventh century BCE and entered the Zagros more or less concurrently with the Persians.

- 15 Cook (1983), 2–3, Porada (1969), 143, and Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 1–4, provide succinct summaries of the views both for and against the identification of Shalmaneser's Parsua as a land inhabited by Persians. Stronach (2003b), 251, and T. C. Young (2003), identify the inhabitants of Parsua as an offshoot of the Persian settlers of Fars, who moved north through the Zagros. Sumner (1988), (1989), and (1994) suggests that the Persians arrived in Fars from the north and east between 1600 BCE and 1000 BCE. Sumner's conclusion is based on the sudden decline of the sedentary population of the Kur River Basin in the middle of the second millennium BCE and the introduction of specific forms of pottery at about the same time. However, arguments based on pottery are speculative and may point to migrations by pre-Iranian itinerants. Stronach (2003b), 250–251, takes a round date of 1000 BCE for the Persian migration. Perhaps the most convincing argument for a north-south movement from Parsua to Fars is the occurrence of Urartian influence in Achaemenid art (and irrigation techniques); see Ghirshman (1964), 92–93; Root (1979), 33. Similarly, the tight bond between Medes and Persians is difficult to explain unless we assume that both groups once lived in close proximity to one another in northwestern Iran.
- 16 Cook (1983), 2–3.
- 17 For possible Avestan allusions to Aryan tribes passing southward through Lorestan, see Herzfeld (1968), 16–17.
- 18 To date, the etymology of the name of the “Medes” has not been satisfactorily explained, especially in an Indo-European context; see Diakonoff (1985b), 57. According to Lanfranchi (2003), 84, the name may represent a foreign, presumably Assyrian, designation imposed upon the ethnically diverse tribes of northwestern Iran. Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 79–81, linked the ethnicon “Mede” to the names of the Indo-Aryan Mitanni and the Iranian Sauromatae, or Sarmatians, among others. Herzfeld traced the name of the Mitanni to Old Iranian **maitana*, meaning “hippodrome” or “race-course.” Tavernier (2007), 27, links *Mada* to proto-Indo-European **med(h)*, meaning “central, situated in the middle.”
- 19 Luckenbill (1926), Part 1, 73.
- 20 Frye (1963), 54.
- 21 Adapted from the translations given in Roux (1992), 290–291 and Luckenbill (1926), Part 1, 144–145.
- 22 For the identification of Bikni with Damavand, see Herzfeld (1947), 722; Cameron (1936), 149. Others have identified Mount Bikni with the Badakhshan Mountains or Mount Alvand; see Vallat “Elam, i. the history of Elam”; Levine (1973), 119.
- 23 Roux (1992), 307.

- 24 The evidence for a Young Avestan association between Azhi Dahaka and Babylon occurs in *Yasht* 5.29, where the villain sacrifices to the goddess Anahita in Babylon (*Bawri*). There is some debate as to whether *Bawri* means “Babylon” or “Beaver-Land,” but I have followed Herzfeld (1947), 714–715, and Schwartz (1985b), 670, keeping in mind that later traditions make Azhi Dahaka a prince of the Arab world, ruling from Babylon or Jerusalem.
- 25 *Yasht* 9.7–9.8; Bivar (1988a).
- 26 See *Yasht* 15.19. translated by Darmesteter.
- 27 See Geiger (1885), 46; Herzfeld (1947), 715; Duleba (1995), 43.
- 28 See Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 6.
- 29 Potts (1999), 272.
- 30 See Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Halule.”
- 31 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 156.
- 32 Brinkman (1973), 94.
- 33 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 1–4; Cameron (1936) 179–180. Waters (1999) speculates that Persian aggression during the seventh century BCE was the principal cause for Elam’s political and cultural decline.
- 34 See Herodotus 1.125.
- 35 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.2.5; Strabo 15.3.1.
- 36 See Cook (1983), 40, 184.
- 37 Herzfeld (1968), 298–301, follows Herodotus in making the Carmanians a Persian tribe. Strabo (15.2.14, 15.3.8) underscores a cultural distinction by describing the practice of Scythian-style head-hunting among the Carmanians. Based on the above, the more sensible view is that the Carmanians were a distinct tribe that was conquered by Cyrus and partly Persianized. See also Briant, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Germanioi.”
- 38 A people known as the Kurti appear as inhabitants of the region to the south of Lake Van during the reign of Tiglathpileser I (1114–1076 BCE). The evidence for the Mardians (also called Amardians) belonging to the pre-Iranian substrate population is less explicit. Quintus Curtius Rufus (5.6.17) states that the Mardians were unlike the other Persians in their way of life. They resided in remote mountainous locations across the Iranian plateau. According to Harmatta (1992), 371, the plateau’s substrate population tended to be driven into the mountains by immigrants from abroad. According to Strabo (11.13.3), the Mardians and Cyrtians lived alongside the Tapyri, Galeni, and Anariaces (Old Persian **Anaryaka*, “non-Aryans”) in northern Iran. None of the last three tribes was Iranian. For a possible Mardian migration westward across the Iranian plateau based on the survival of the name

“Amardi,” transformed to “Amol,” in settlements in Central Asia and Mazandaran, see Frye (1963), 44. For possible pre-Indo-Aryan migrations of Indo-Europeans to Iran, see A. Parpola (2002). Potts (2005), 23, speculates that the Mardians were Elamites, but his argument is unconvincing.

39 See Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cyrtians.”

40 For Mardian settlements by the Persian Gulf, see Ptolemy 6.4.3.

41 See Bellew (1891), 6; Toynbee (1963a), 625–626.

42 See Herzfeld (1968), 297.

43 See Cook (1983), 40, 236, endnote 3, citing the research of Tomaszek.

44 The following reconstruction represents my synthesis of the information provided by Cook (1983), 39–41, and Herzfeld (1947), 726–737, and (1968), 298–301.

45 A group of them may have settled farther south, for Ptolemy enumerates the Pasargadae among the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf coast, but this evidence may reflect a later migration, perhaps precipitated by Darius I’s reprisals against rebellious clans or the Macedonian invasion of Iran; see Marcianus Heracleensis (1.28).

46 The Maspians have been linked to the present-day Mastpi, a Lorish tribe from Posht-e Kuh, as well as to the ancient Massabatice (or Messabates), inhabitants of the region between Khuzestan and Fars; see Herzfeld (1947), 729; Frye (1984), 89. Several Maraphians receive mention in the classical sources and, seemingly, the Elamite tablets from Persepolis; see Herodotus 4.167; Aeschylus *The Persians* 778; Persepolis Fortification Tablets 447, 909–11, and 1797 in Hallock (1969). But these references do not provide a firm location for their territory. My guess as to the region they settled is based on the fact that the Maraphians, along with the Maspians and Pasargadae, formed the core of Cyrus II’s ancestral kingdom.

47 *Patishuvarish* was a common Iranian toponym for districts situated near large mountains. A similarly-named region, known to the Assyrians as *Patu’sharra*, existed east of Mount Bikni; see Herzfeld (1968), 317–318.

48 Herzfeld (1947), 734–736, and (1968), 300–301, equates the Yautiya with the later-attested Jutt, or “camel-drivers,” and speaks of other aboriginal inhabitants of Parsa. Herzfeld notes that, in contrast to the “loud-speaking” Baluchis, the Persians prided themselves on being soft or polite in speech.

49 See Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscription a; Xerxes I, Persepolis, Inscription h.

50 Waters (1999). Consider also Darius’ outright denigration of the Elamite religion in the Bisutun Inscription (see page 137).

- 51 See Carter (1994), 67, 76.
- 52 Herzfeld (1941), 181.
- 53 The Arabs rendered this term *Huz/Khuz*, hence Khuzestan, “Khuz-Land,” and *Ahvaz*, “(City) of the Huz”; see Bosworth, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ahvaz.”
- 54 Plato *Alcibiades I* 121; Aelian *On Animals* 12.21. See also Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenes.” The rearing of a prince by an eagle is a popular Iranian theme that occurs in the *Shahnameh* legend of Zal the albino. The eagle’s association with royalty relates to Verethragna’s avatar as a raptor; see *Yasht* 14.41.
- 55 Cameron (1936), 179, makes Achaemenes a Persian commander who fought at the Battle of Halule. Stronach (2003b), 256–258, deconstructs Darius’ genealogy to date Achaemenes to the second half of the seventh century BCE. I do not agree with his approach. See Appendix I.
- 56 Strabo 15.3.1. Also Cook (1985), 241–244.
- 57 Strabo 15.3.1.
- 58 For the Persian kings settling their political prisoners in the islands of the Persian Gulf, see Herodotus 7.80. For a possible reference to a leper colony, see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 43.
- 59 Quintus Curtius Rufus (5.6.17) describes the Mardians as cave-dwellers.
- 60 See the inscriptions attributed to Ariaramnes and Arsames from Hamadan; Darius I, Persepolis, Inscription d. In ancient Iran the term “horses and men” connoted the “army,” such that these inscriptions may be interpreted to praise Parsa as a breeding ground for powerful militaries.

61 Herodotus 9.122.

The March of Empires: Assyrians, Scythians, and Medes

- 1 Exodus 20:5, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.
- 2 Thompson (1900), lxxxviii.
- 3 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 161–162.
- 4 See Jacobsen and Lloyd (1935).
- 5 Diakonoff (1985b), 121.
- 6 Frye (1963), 56.
- 7 See Olmstead (1948), 323–327.
- 8 The reliability of Herodotus’ narrative of Median history (1.95–1.106), also known as the *Medikos Logos*, has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Among recent writers, Helm (1981) and Sancisi-Weerdenberg, (1988), (1990), and (1994), have been most vocal in doubting its veracity. Their lead has been followed by

other scholars, such as Liverani (2003), Roaf (2003), Henkelman (2003a), Rollinger (2003a) and (2003b), and Wiesehofer (2003). On the other hand, Brown (1988), 86, insists that “no sound reasons emerge to doubt the essentials of the *Medikos Logos* or its basic chronology,” and Diakonoff (1985b) admirably reconciles Herodotus’ narrative with the information in the Assyrian and Babylonian tablets and the Old Testament. I accept the reasoned conclusion of Bivar (2005), 342, that “the Herodotean narrative remains a necessary point of reference” for any history of Media. For further discussions of the Median epoch and the relationship between the Assyrian texts and the classical sources, see Cameron (1936), 176–177; Herzfeld (1947), 23, 721, 726; Kristensen (1988), 107, footnote 371; Kuhrt (2007a), 20–21.

9 Herodotus 1.99, translated by de Sélincourt.

10 See Liverani (2003), 5.

11 See Brown (1986), (1988), 86, and (1990), 71–73; Radner (2003), 38; Liverani (2003), 4–12.

12 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 208–209, 215–216. For 676 BCE as the probable date of this expedition, see Radner (2003), 58.

13 The date of Khshathrita’s rebellion is based on records containing Esarhaddon’s questions to the oracle of Shamash. For 672 BCE as the most likely, and latest possible date, for these texts, see Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Kashtariti”; Radner (2003), 58. For slightly earlier dates, see Diakonoff (1985b), 101–108; Herzfeld (1968), 191–192.

14 For the meaning of “Kar-Kashshi,” see Herzfeld (1968), 192; Radner (2003), 61.

15 See Herzfeld (1968), 5–9, 192, and (1947), 728; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Nisaya.” Herzfeld links the Arabic word for horse, *faras*, to ancient Parsua and Nisaya.

16 See Diakonoff (1985b), 107.

17 See Herodotus 1.95.

18 See Cameron (1936), 177; Diakonoff (1985b), 113–114.

19 Herodotus conception of Median history contemplates the rule of four kings, the duration of whose reigns was as follows: Deioces (53 years), Phraortes (22 years), Cyaxares (40 years), and Astyages (35 years). As Astyages was deposed in 550 BCE, this chronology indicates that Deioces’ accession must have occurred in 700 BCE. Under this chronology, Phraortes must have reigned from 647–625 BCE, which dates do not coincide with Khshathrita’s period of activity. Furthermore, Herodotus himself provides an alternate chronology of Median history whereby the entire period of Median hegemony lasted 128 years (678–550 BCE). Some scholars have

attempted to reconcile these discrepancies by suggesting that Herodotus accidentally inverted the durations of the reigns of Deioces and Phraortes. Thus, according to these experts, Deioces reigned as a petty district lord for twenty-two years (700–678 BCE), whereas Phraortes ruled as king for fifty-three years (678–625 BCE); see Dandamaev and Medvedskaya, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Media.”

- 20 Regarding the titular aspects of Khshathrita’s name, see Brown (1988), 77. According to Kent, (1953), 180–181, “Khshathrita” represents a shortening of a “royal” compound name, such as **Khshathra-dara* (New Persian *Shahriyar*, “Possessor of a Kingdom”). Rawlinson (1849), 118, explains the name to mean either “Who Has Obtained the Empire” or “Who Has Obtained the Crown.” Tavernier (2007), 23, views the name as a retrenchment of **Khshathriya-tausa*, “Granting the Kingdom.” The interpretation of “Khshathrita” as a royal epithet may have a parallel in the Bisutun Inscription. Russell (1997), 19–20, indicates that another of Darius’ rivals carried a name that was really a title. Specifically, the name of the Armenian upstart Arkha, who usurped the Babylonian throne in 521 BCE, has been compared to *arka*, the Armenian word for “king.” Perhaps the sixth century BCE Fravartish simply aimed to revive the protocol of the old Median monarchy without implying that the Deiocid kings and Khshathrita belonged to the same dynasty. Consider the case of the Babylonian rebel Nidintu-Bel, a contemporary of Khshathrita, who claimed the throne-name “Nabuchadrezzar,” as well as a filial relationship with the last Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus, who was not a direct descendant of the historical Nabuchadrezzar II.
- 21 This is based on the interpretation by Herzfeld (1968), 191–192, of the 128-year chronology given by Herodotus (1.130) as reflecting the establishment of a royal fire at Ecbatana. Herzfeld, of course, attributes the establishment of that fire to Khshathrita, but there is no direct evidence to support this proposition.
- 22 For the identification of Ecbatana with Sagbat or Sagbitu, the “royal city” from which the Median rebel Hanasiruka fought Assyria in 815 BCE, see Medvedskaya (2002b); Radner (2013).
- 23 See Cameron (1936), 178, footnote 20; Kent (1953), 212; Frye (1963), 68–69; Brown, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ecbatana”; Tavernier (2007), 26. For Poebel’s alternate Iranian etymology of Ecbatana as “Fortress of the Medes” (Old Persian **Hang-matana*), see Cameron (1936), 178, footnote 20.
- 24 See Medvedskaya (2002b).
- 25 See *Yasht* 13.143–13.144. For a possible connection between the Avestan Hvyaonas and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (Old Persian

- Yauna) or Turkic Huns, see Herzfeld (1947), 771–774. Regarding the Sainus, see Harmatta (1994b), 423, 427.
- 26 Herodotus 1.106, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 27 See Diakonoff (1985b), 93–96; Szemerényi (1980). Consider also that the Sarmatian ethnonym likely derives from a root **saru*, meaning “arrow”; see Windfuhr (2000), 19.
- 28 See McLeod (1965), 4.
- 29 Herodotus 1.104, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 30 See Vogelsang (1992) and (1998), 81–95, with due attention to Frye’s critique (1995), 77.
- 31 See Vogelsang (1992), 182, 227–229. This misconception persisted into early Hellenistic times.
- 32 See Vogelsang (1992), 180–183; Herodotus 1.201–1.202. The Father of History understood this Araxes River to constitute the frontier between the Persian Empire and the land of the Massagetae, whom scholars commonly associate with the Saka Tigrakhauda, or “Pointed-Hat Sakas,” of the Old Persian inscriptions (compare **tigra* to New Persian *tir*, “arrow,” and **khauda*, to New Persian *khud*, “hood”). These Sakas were of Central Asian provenance and maintained the greatest presence of any nomadic group in western Iran; see page Appendix XVI.
- 33 See Vogelsang (1992), 184; Herzfeld (1968), 327. Consider also that the names of certain Scythian and Cimmerian chieftains in the Assyrian inscriptions (for example, Sandakshatru, Ishpikai) betray clear eastern Iranian roots; see Vogelsang (1992), 184; also Tokhtas’ev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cimmerians.” “Sandakshatru,” the alternate reading of which is “Sandakurru,” means either “Splendid Kingdom” (Old Iranian **Sandak-khshathra*) or “Splendid Son” (**Sandak-kurru*); see Harmatta (1996), 182. Ishpikai, seems to denote northern Iranian **Spaka*, Old Persian *Saka* – that is, the ethnonym of the Sakas.
- 34 See Lanfranchi (2003), 90–91.
- 35 See Vogelsang (1992), 216, 305.
- 36 See Vogelsang (1992), 173–179; Lubotsky (2002), 189.
- 37 See Herodotus 7.67; Olmstead (1948), 31, 240.
- 38 On the Persians’ adoption of Median dress, see Herodotus 7.62. A further indication of the influence of Scythian military practices is offered by Herodotus (1.73), who states that noble Medes used to send their boys to the Scythians to learn archery and the Scythian language.
- 39 Herodotus 1.106. For the problematic twenty-eight-year Scythian interregnum, see Diakonoff (1985b), 112–113; Dandamaev and Medvedskaya, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Media.” Also Justin

- 40 Partatua asked for Esarhaddon's daughter's hand in marriage.
- 41 See Delaunay, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Aššurbanipal." Compare to the theories of Diakonoff (1985b), 126, and Drews (2004), 116–118, discussed in endnote [71] below.
- 42 Roux (1992), 335.
- 43 Seignobos (1975), 64.
- 44 See Potts (2012), 46–47. Compare to Henkelman (2003c), 254–264.
- 45 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 381.
- 46 See Olmstead (1948), 31.
- 47 Herodotus 1.103, translated by Purvis.
- 48 See Herodotus 1.103; Diakonoff (1985b), 121–122. Regarding the political implications of Cyaxares' reforms, consider that Genghis Khan revised the Mongol army along similar lines in the thirteenth century CE to enhance its military efficiency, as well as to break the tribal connections within Mongol society.
- 49 See Appendix XVIII. Bivar (2000), 23, is inclined to believe the story as true on the basis that the Iranians employed a similar ruse to kill a Russian commander in Mazandaran during the nineteenth century.
- 50 Herodotus 1.101. Herzfeld (1947), 725–726, provides Iranian derivations for the Median tribal names: "Busae" from Avestan *Buzhi*, to mean "Alcohol-Worshippers"; "Parateceni" from Old Iranian **Paraitaka*, to mean "Dwellers of the Oasis"; "Strouchates" from Old Iranian **Strushna*, **Strughna*, to be compared to the later toponym "Usrushana"; "Arizanti" from **Arya-zantu*, "to mean the "Aryan Tribe," or, alternatively, from Avestan *Thri-zantu*, "Of the Three Tribes," an ancient epithet of Raga (Ray); "Budii" linked to the name of the Buyid dynasty (*circa* tenth century CE), which was from Gilan. Herzfeld does not classify the Magi as a tribe, but other scholars have done so and have derived their name from Avestan *maga*, meaning "gift" or "liturgical purity"; see, for example, Mole (1963); Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 333.
- 51 See Vogelsang (1992), 176–177; Diakonoff (1985b), 127–128, footnote 3. I am not persuaded by the theory of T. C. Young (1988a), 15–16, 31, and (2003), 245, who maintains that the Medes conquered only the Persians of Parsua in the central Zagros and never those of Fars, because it seems far-fetched that the classical sources would err on so crucial a detail.
- 52 Diodorus Siculus 2.34, translated by Oldfather.
- 53 See Herodotus 1.105.
- 54 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F8b, F9. The relevant

fragments are from Berossus' history and have been preserved by the fourth century CE Roman author Eusebius of Caesarea, who mistakenly makes Amytis the daughter of Astyages, when, in fact, her father must have been Cyaxares or one of his elder sons; see Kuhrt (2007a), 45. Astyages could not have been born much earlier than 624 BCE, as he led the campaign against Cyrus in 550 BCE.

55 See Wiseman (1991), 8.

56 Glassner (2004), 223; Diakonoff (1985b), 123–124.

57 See Lanfranchi (2003), 118.

58 See Henkelman (2003a), 198–199.

59 Nahum 2:3–3:19, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.

60 See Curtis (2003).

61 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 32; Diakonoff (1985b), 125, footnote 2; Herzfeld (1941), 194. Consider also the discovery at Arbela of administrative records inscribed in Mannaean; Cyaxares or Astyages may have relocated some of the indigenous inhabitants of Azerbaijan to Assyria, presumably both to strengthen Median control over the latter country and to facilitate the Iranian takeover of the former.

62 Liverani (2003).

63 See Toynbee (1963b), 420.

64 For the opposing view that Urartu survived as an independent kingdom until its conquest by Cyrus the Great in 547 BCE, see Rollinger (2004). Irrespective of when the kingdoms of Urartu and Manna finally collapsed, their names are attested as toponyms in the Old Testament and classical sources. Thus, the name “Urartu” survives in “Ararat,” while Manna persists in Greek “Mantiene” and, in all likelihood, “Matiene”; see Herzfeld (1941), 180–181 and 190.

65 Toynbee (1963a), 605–606, 660–668, provides that the Medes elevated the Armenian tribes to dominance in the former territories of the Urartian kingdom so that they might look after Median interests in the region. If so, common bonds dating back to the period of nomadic occupation may have played a pivotal role. Consider that the Armenians remembered the Medes as having crowned their first native ruler: Paroyr the “son of the son of the Saka”; see Garsoian (1997), 40. On the disparate origins of the Armenians, see Russell (1997).

66 Toynbee (1963a), 608–611, explains the name *Katpatuka* as the “Pactyans of Hatti.” Hatti was the land of the Hittites in Anatolia, and the Pactyans were the ancestors of the modern Pashtuns. According to Toynbee, the migrating steppe nomads had driven

tribes of the Pactyans to Asia Minor.

67 Herodotus 1.74.

68 For challenges to the historicity of this eclipse, see Mosshammer (1981); Rollinger (2003b), 309–310.

69 This conclusion is based on the reference to a war between Alyattes and Astyages in a fragment of a poem composed by Alcaeus of Lesbos; see Podlecki (1969), 79. For a possible second Median-Lyidian war in 582 BCE, see Burn (1962), 31. Herzfeld (1947), 90, has derived Astyages' name to mean something like "lance-hurler."

70 See Herodotus 1.74, 4.70 Lydia, too, had been overrun by the steppe nomads during the seventh century BCE, and the Lydian kings made extensive use of Scythian and Cimmerian horsemen in their armies. Indeed, some scholars have linked the biblical ethnonyms "Gog" and "Magog" to those of Gyges (Assyrian *Guggu*), the founder of the Mermnad dynasty to which Alyattes belonged. Thus, according to Diakonoff (1985b), 126, and Drews (2004), 116–118, "Gog" denotes Gyges, and "Magog" denotes the "Land of Gog," meaning Lydia. For an alternate identification of Gog, see page 32.

A Life Shrouded in Myth: Cyrus' Origins and Early Years

1 See Esther 6:1; Diodorus Siculus 2.22.5, 2.32.4. Regarding the oral emphasis of ancient Iranian society, consider that there are very few native Iranian words for written instruments. The New Persian word for a register or file, *daftar*, derives from ancient Greek *dipthera* and that the Old Persian term for an inscription, *dipi*, is an Elamite or Sumerian loanword; see Rajabzadeh, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "daftar"; Kent (1953), 191.

2 See Skjaervo (2005), 56.

3 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Historiography, ii. Pre-Islamic Period"; Bivar (2000).

4 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Historiography, ii. Pre-Islamic Period."

5 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.2.1, translated by Miller.

6 Ctesias betrays his own claim by stating that these texts contained an account of the Trojan War; see Drews (1973), 110; Cook (1983), 21; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Ctesias."

7 Herodotus 1.107–1.123. All quotations in my summary of this legend are from de Sèlincourt's translation.

8 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (1–46). Photius alludes to Ctesias' legend when he states (§ 1) that Cyrus was not a

- kinsman of Astyages. Justin (1.4–6) combines aspects of this legend with the one offered by Herodotus as well as, perhaps, the lost account of Charon of Lampsacus.
- 9 The legend makes clear that the horse dung carried by Oebaras portended dominion and power; see Panaino (2009); Basello (2009). Horse divination also appears in the story of how Oebaras won Darius I the throne; see Herodotus 3.85–3.87.
 - 10 For the antiquity of the literary forms found in the legends about Cyrus, see Frye (1963), 76; Murray (1967); Redford (1967); Drews (1974); Briant (2002), 15–16; Kuhrt (2003). For Mesopotamian motifs in the dreams that Herodotus attributes to Astyages, see Pelling (1996). Pelling emphasizes the mystical qualities ascribed to urine in Mesopotamian religio-medical texts, as well as the use of the sacred vine or the tree of life as a symbol of strength and prosperity in Assyrian art. See also Panaino (2009).
 - 11 See Herodotus 1.122; Justin 1.4; Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 12.4.2. According to the earlier version of the legend, Cyrus was abandoned in the wilderness on Harpagus' orders but miraculously saved by a she-dog, which defended him from wild animals and gave him milk (according to Aelian, who probably cited Charon of Lampsacus, this dog belonged to Mandane). The link between the earlier version and the one given by Herodotus rests in the name of Mitradata's wife, Spaco, for as Herodotus (1.110, translated by Rawlinson) provides, "in the Median tongue, the word 'Spaco' means a 'bitch.'" This is correct, as New Persian *sag*, or "dog," derives from Old Persian **saka*, cognate of Median **spaka*. The story recounted by Herodotus thus represents a rationalization of the original legend, in which Cyrus' upbringing resembled that of Romulus and Remus. Incidentally, Herodotus' note about the meaning of Spaco's name constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks for our knowledge of the Median language; see Kent (1953), 8.
 - 12 See Drews (1974); Briant (2002), 16; Kuhrt (2003); Henkelman (2006); Haubold (2012).
 - 13 See Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Harpagos"; Bivar (1998), 12; Balcer (1984), 318.
 - 14 See Shahbazi (1975).
 - 15 Because Cyrus was the son of Cambyses, a Persian king, certain scholars interpret the legend recounted by Ctesias, which makes Cyrus out to be the son of a bandit, as an attack upon Cyrus' character; see Kent (1953), 159; Frye (1963), 76–77. This theory is unconvincing, because it neglects the parallels between Ctesias' story, on the one hand, and the Sargon legend and certain Iranian epics on the other.

- 16 The attribution of Persepolis Fortification Seal 93 to Cyrus I is commonplace. T. C. Young (2003), 245, has suggested that the seal belonged, not to the early Achaemenid king Cyrus I but to a contemporary of Darius I, during whose reign the seal was still in use. However, this theory seems untenable based on stylistic resemblances between the engraving on the Anshanite's seal and those on Neo-Assyrian artifacts; see Garrison (2011).
- 17 For the Old Persian pronunciation of "Anshan," see Gershevitch (1979a), 148–149.
- 18 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 3. The Old Persian term *duvita-paranam* has been alternatively defined as meaning in "double succession" (or "in two lines") or "in an eternal line"; see Dandamaev (1989), 5–8. Vallat (2011), 274–275, presents a strong case for the reading "in two lines."
- 19 It is a peculiarity of the Old Persian language that, during the sixth century BCE, the concept of sovereignty over a given land was expressed not in the expected manner "king of country X," but through the use of the locative "king *in* country X"; see Kent (1946), 207. Herzfeld (1968), 169–170, interprets the archaic title "King in Persia," which appears at Bisutun but not in subsequent Old Persian inscriptions, as a relic of Median vassalage. However, assuming this rule of syntax to reflect an actual historical condition, the appropriate situation would seem to be political fragmentation, not subservience to foreign authority. Indeed, we may envision an archaic epoch in which the highest echelon of Persian society consisted of those who held kingships "in Persia."
- 20 See Herodotus 1.125. Recent studies in Neo-Elamite history support the view that Cyrus I's kingdom was territorially limited. Specifically, these studies demonstrate the existence of multiple Elamite principalities scattered in the highlands of Khuzestan and western Fars in the latter half of the seventh and early decades of the sixth centuries BCE; see Potts (1999), 289–307; Vallat, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Elam, i. the history of Elam"; Stronach (2003b). As nothing indicates that these principalities formed part of an overarching Persian kingdom, the necessary inference is that they existed alongside similarly small Persian states.
- 21 The authenticity of these texts has been questioned since their discovery; see Kent (1946) and (1953), 12. However, some scholars have deemed the inscriptions authentic based on stylistic peculiarities and the circumstances of their discovery; see Cameron (1936), 213; Herzfeld (1947), 68–69; Olmstead (1948), 24; Sharp (1964), 18–19; Ghirshman (1978), 120; Vallat (2011), 279. Note that Arsames is not described as a king in Artaxerxes III, Persepolis, Inscription a.

- 22 For the Persian form of the name and proposed etymologies, see T. C. Young (1988a), 44; Koch, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Batrakataš”; Tavernier (2007), 392; Stronach and Gopnik, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Pasargadae.”
- 23 See Dandamaev (1989), 13. Henkelman (2008a), 48, suggests that the Maraphians bore an Elamite name.
- 24 See Herodotus 1.125; Medvedskaya (2002b).
- 25 Whereas most of the rebel kings named in the Bisutun Inscription were said to have falsely claimed descent from rulers whom Cyrus had deposed, the two pretenders who instigated revolts among the Medes and their allies simply declared themselves to be “descendants of Cyaxares.” The implication is that Astyages had no sons.
- 26 The common counter-argument that Ctesias speaks the truth when he denies Cyrus’ relation to Astyages carries no weight and is easily explained on the basis that Ctesias’ sources confined their narrative to the framework of the Sargon legend, which required Cyrus to be born to mountain tribesmen; see also Cameron (1936), 224. Some scholars, such as Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 109–110, and Cook (1983), 25, have cast doubt on the notion that Cyrus was a half-Mede based on a presumptuous interpretation of Herodotus’ narrative. Specifically, they have argued that, by making Mandane Cyrus’ mother, the Iranian storytellers who devised the quasi-historical account of Cyrus’ origins sought to make the Persian founder the legitimate heir not just to the Median Empire but also to the kingdom of Lydia. However, this interpretation requires us to assume that Mandane’s mother was the Lydian princess Aryenis, whom Astyages married in 585 BCE, and Herodotus never declares that Mandane was the daughter of this princess. Furthermore, to the extent this legend may be traced to Cyrus’ own propaganda, it is absurd to assume that the Persian founder would have claimed to be the second generation offspring of a marriage that occurred less than three decades before he ascended the throne of Anshan. Nor is there any reason to think that Astyages had only one wife. As Strabo (11.13.12) relates, Median custom required noblemen to marry at least five women, and the Armenian historians record the name of Astyages’ principal queen as Anuish; see Moses of Chorene 1.30. So despite the Achaemenids’ well-known practice of fabricating genealogies for political gain – see, for example, Herodotus 3.2–3.3, 7.150 – the tradition of Cyrus’ Median ancestry seems to be accurate.
- 27 See Duncker (1881), 373.
- 28 As recounted by Cicero *On Divination* 1.23.46. The anecdote is partially based on an Iranian myth regarding the *Farnah*; see

Appendix XVIII.

- 29 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.3.15.
- 30 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.3.17, translated by Dakyns.
- 31 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.4–1.4.11.
- 32 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.11, translated by Miller.
- 33 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.25–1.4.27. Interestingly, Xenophon provides that this return journey was recorded in a “Chronicle.” Herodotus (1.121) also mentions Cyrus’ return.
- 34 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.3.17, translated by Dakyns 1.4.26.
- 35 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.24.
- 36 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.25, translated by Dakyns.
- 37 See, for example, Herodotus 1.89 and 1.209.
- 38 Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 4.4, translated by Dryden.
- 39 Plutarch *The Remarkable Saying of Kings and Commanders* 172e, translated by Hinton.
- 40 To judge from the Bisutun reliefs, the early Persians wore their hair long, reaching to the shoulder. A slightly shorter cut, more bunched in the back, appears in the reliefs at Persepolis.
- 41 See Herodotus 1.115–1.116. The quote is from Rawlinson’s translation.
- 42 Diodorus Siculus 9.22, translated by Oldfather.
- 43 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 14.633c. Dinon’s testimony is consistent with Ctesias’ claim that, while in Media, “Cyrus became great, and his name was heard everywhere”; see *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (7), translated by Duncker (1881). The office of Royal Cupbearer, which Ctesias states that Cyrus attained, was an important one in the ancient Near East and, on ceremonial occasions, was often occupied by high-ranking military commanders; see, for example, II Kings 18:17.
- 44 See Drews (1973), 7.
- 45 Regarding the ethnic dimension to this struggle, consider the statement of Strabo (11.13.4) that “the Kadusians have an army of foot soldiers not inferior to that of the *Ariani*.” The use of the term *Ariani* (“Aryan,” “Iranian”), which Herodotus (7.62) mentions as the ancient appellation of the Medes, is significant in this context, inasmuch as it draws attention to the opposition between Iranians and non-Iranians. Herzfeld (1947), 717–718, cites additional evidence regarding the Kadusians as non-Iranian aborigines.
- 46 It is nevertheless curious that Ctesias often mentions the Kadusians as though they were neighbors of the Persians; see, for example, *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F4, 90 F66 11. Albeit a teller of tall tales, Ctesias was, if nothing else, well versed in Persian geography and, in fact, composed an itinerary of the Persian

- Empire's royal roads. Thus, the Persians may have used the term "Kadusian" in the same vein the Sasanids did the ethnonym "Kurd," which designated not only the people of Kurdistan but all nomads "who may have had an uneasy relationship with the urban minded Sasanians"; see Daryaei (2009), 40–41.
- 47 Herodotus 1.110, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 48 See Ptolemy 6.2; Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6. See also Brunner (1983), 763, 765; Duncker (1881), 388.
- 49 Cook (1983), 197.
- 50 The Chaldaean tribesmen of the *Cyropaedia* bore no relation to the Chaldeans of Babylonia. Some scholars have connected their name to that of Haldi, the chief god of the Urartian pantheon, suggesting that they were a tribe that identified itself through the worship of this deity; see Garsoian (1997), 40. Others have identified the Chaldaeans with the Georgian-speaking Chalybes, who lived near the Black Sea and were the forebears of the modern Lazis; see Diakonoff (1985b), 142–143.
- 51 For why the episode of Tigranes is likely factual in its general details, see Stuart (1850), 153. Stuart argues that Xenophon must have derived his story of Cyrus' Armenian campaign from authentic sources, because Tigranes is unknown to other Greek authors but figures prominently in the national history attributed to the fifth century CE Armenian historian Moses of Chorene (1.24–1.31). According to Moses, Astyages married Tigranes' sister, Tigranuhi, in order to allay hostilities with the Armenians. Duncker (1881), 359–361, Diakonoff (1984), 97, Russell (1987), 44–45, and Redgate (2000), 50–51, see varying degrees of historical truth in this legend. Note that Tigranes' name is Iranian and derives from a root **tigra*, meaning "arrow" or "swift." The Bisutun Inscription (§ 27) mentions an Armenian fortress called Tigra, which may have received its name from a local dynasty of kings.
- 52 The dialogue included in Xenophon's account of the court-martial of the Armenian king has often been deemed unhistorical due to resemblances with his description of the trial of Socrates. It is true that much of the philosophical discourse in the former narrative is clearly Greek. However, the Athenian author may well have based Cyrus' questions to the Armenian king on a traditional Persian mode of interrogation that he himself had witnessed. In this connection, consider Xenophon's presence during the trial of the Persian traitor Orontes, conducted by Cyrus the Younger (*Anabasis* 1.6), and the similar lines of questioning used by the fifth century BCE Persian prince and the hero of the *Cyropaedia*.
- 53 Regarding the adoption of Assyrian habits, the Apocryphal Book of Tobit (14:15) mentions Cyaxares settling thousands of Assyrian

- deportees near the Median capital. Athenaeus (*Deipnosophists* 12.514d) cites an earlier author named Clearchus, who reported that the Medes castrated many men from neighboring tribes, ostensibly to serve as harem guards. If derived from Iranian sources, this anecdote would show the disdain with which the Persians viewed the development of the harem in Ecbatana.
- 54 William Shakespeare *Henry IV, Part 2*, Act 3, Scene 1.
- 55 Herodotus 1.125; Strabo 15.3.1. Herodotus' information on the division between agricultural and nomadic tribes seems to have been derived from a source predating the satrapal reforms of Darius I and may well reflect conditions before the imperial era; see Herzfeld (1968), 298.
- 56 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 5.67; Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 1.31; Briant (2002), 442.
- 57 See Sumner (1986); T. C. Young (1988a), 29–30; Carter (1994); Briant (2002), 21, 88. It is perhaps telling that no definitively Persian ruins have yet been identified in the archaeological record for the pre-imperial period, although this may simply reflect the paucity of excavation in Iran. The Bisutun Inscription and Persepolis Fortification Tablets mention numerous settlements in Fars, some of which must have pre-existed Cyrus II's rise to power. Hansman (1975) speculates that pre-imperial strongholds made of mud-brick may have existed at several sites, where stone terraces were later erected. Of course, just as the later Persian emperors spent much of their time moving between their capitals, so, too, did the early Persian kinglets presumably travel between the settlements they ruled. The engraving on the famous Arjan bowl shows a pre-imperial prince of the Behbahan region holding court outside a walled settlement, as well as in a yurt; see Stronach (2004).
- 58 Herodotus 1.136.
- 59 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.2. This account of the Persian curriculum is sometimes doubted because of its uncanny resemblance to the military training of Spartan youths.
- 60 Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.8–1.2.9) actually states that the boys entered active military service at the age of seventeen and that they remained liable for service for a period of ten years thereafter. But Herodotus (1.136, 1.209, 3.139) and Strabo (15.3.8) indicate that Persian males were considered adults only after attaining the age of twenty. I have followed the reconciliation of Sekunda (1992), 5.
- 61 See Herodotus 3.84–3.87.
- 62 Strabo 15.3.18, translated by Jones.
- 63 For the importance of ritualistic gift-giving, see Briant (2002),

302–323. For a culture of duels and honor, see Cook (1983), 230–231; Herodotus 9.107 (Masistes’ duel with Artayntes); Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 40–42 (one-on-one combat between opposing Persian generals); Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 1.17 (the suicide of the Persian satrap Arsites following Alexander’s victory at Granicus).

64 The Persepolis archives provide interesting insights into the acculturation of Iranians and Elamites in the highlands of Fars. In the tablets deciphered to date, approximately ninety percent of the region’s natives bear Iranian names, compared to only ten percent with Elamite names; see Basello (2011), 62. The scribes reserved the term “Elamite” for the inhabitants of Khuzestan; see Henkelman (2011a), 585.

65 See Briant (2002), 21.

66 A small silver fragment with a few partial cuneiform signs has been discovered at the Median site of Tepe Nush-e Jan; see Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 272. However, the signs are too fragmentary to permit definitive conclusions, as both the provenance and date of the artifact are uncertain; see Muscarella (1994), 59.

67 Liverani (2003) has identified these sites as Tepe Nush-e Jan and Godin Tepe (which were indisputably founded by the Medes), Baba Jan (which may also have been founded by the Medes), and the Mannaeian foundations at Hasanlu and Ziwiye. Uncertainty as to the precise date and circumstances of the abandonment of these sites has spawned divergent theories as to sociopolitical conditions within the Median heartland. Various scholars have attributed the fate of these sites to the imposition of Assyrian rule, the centralization of power at Ecbatana, or a sharp economic decline precipitated by the destruction of the Assyrian Empire (it has been theorized that many Median city-states had initially arisen as secondary states dependent upon trade with Assyria for survival); see Brown (1990); Liverani (2003). Other theories point to social and religious changes heralded by the Persian conquest of Media; see Curtis (2005), 123. Religious considerations are relevant, because the temple at Nush-e Jan was systematically closed off and filled with shale to prevent future use (see page 124). On the other hand, certain settlements that the Medes built outside Ecbatana remained occupied. These include Ozbaki Tepe near Tehran (perhaps the site of ancient Raga), Tell Gubba in eastern Iraq, and Ulug Depe in Turkmenistan; see Stronach (2012).

68 See Harmatta (1971a), 10–15; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 62.

69 See, for example, Helm (1981); Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1988) and

(1990); Liverani (2003); Roaf (2003); Henkelman (2003a); Rollinger (2003a) and (2003b); Wiesehofer (2003); and Lanfranchi, Roaf, and Rollinger (2003). Compare to Harmatta (1971a); Graf (1984); Diakonoff (1985b); Brown (1988) and (1990); Vogelsang (1992) and (1998); Muscarella (1994); Bivar (2005); Tuplin (2004). In my opinion, the arguments against the existence of the Median Empire are precarious. They tend to overlook that the Median state was somewhat short-lived, and there have been relatively few archaeological studies of potential Median sites, as Ecbatana itself has not been systematically excavated. A sensible compromise is to characterize the Median Empire as a nomadic state for much of its duration.

Overthrow of the Medes: Symbols of Power

- 1 See Root (1991), 12–13.
- 2 Stronach (2011) discusses this concept in analyzing the depiction of soldiers and courtiers in Elamite garb at Persepolis and Susa.
- 3 All references are discussed in Henkelman (2011a), 597–600.
- 4 For the view that the Medes occupied Nineveh, Arbela, and Ashur, see Diakonoff (1985b), 125. Compare to Rollinger (2003a); Curtis (2003).
- 5 For a summary of the arguments for and against the occupation of Elam by the Medes and Babylonians during the period 612–539 BCE, see Potts (1999), 288–295.
- 6 A similar brick has been discovered at Persepolis, which was not founded until after Nabuchadrezzar's death; see Schmidt (1953), 144, 179. It is thus conceivable that the stamped bricks were transported to Susa and Persepolis after the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire as booty; see Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 58–59.
- 7 Evidence for the tense political situation may be gleaned from Babylonian documents that mention the Median king's apparent refusal to extradite Babylonian fugitives who had escaped to Iran; see Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 302. Anti-Median propaganda may explain Berossus' factually incorrect statement that Astyages served as Nabuchadrezzar's satrap.
- 8 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.4.16–1.4.18. Also Floor (2011), 182–183.
- 9 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 2.4.12. Tuplin (2003), 367–368, cites modern studies that conclude that the Median Wall was no more than 5.5 meters tall for most of its course.
- 10 Jeremiah 50:41–51:29, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.

- 11 Herodotus 1.134, translated by Grene. This testimony agrees with the archaeological evidence, which shows little evidence of direct Median control outside the northern part of the Iranian plateau; see Stronach (2012).
- 12 See Vogelsang (1992) for a thorough articulation of this dynamic.
- 13 See Herodotus 1.123. That the Medes would have established settlements in Persia is not improbable given that they apparently did so at Erzerum and Van in Armenia; see Redgate (2000), 58.
- 14 See Herodotus 1.100.
- 15 Included in Herodotus' list of Persian tribes are the nomadic Dai and Dropici, whom scholars have identified with the Dahae and Derbices of Central Asia. These nomads belonged to the confederation of Saka Tigrakhauda, or "Pointed-Hat Sakas," large numbers of whom seem to have settled in Media during the seventh century BCE; see Herodotus 3.92, which mentions the *Orthocorybantes*, the "Pointed Hats," as inhabitants of Media proper. That the Median kings forcibly relocated these tribes to Persia is not unlikely, even though no scholar, to my knowledge, has raised the possibility. The displacement of nomadic groups by the sovereign power is well attested in the history of modern Iran, and in the Afsharid and Qajar periods, the shahs transplanted particularly belligerent tribes to areas of the kingdom that were prone to rebellion. Population displacements of the sort served to break up troublesome tribal confederations, as well as to punish insurgent sedentary populations, for Iranian nomads have always tended to raid agricultural settlements. That the Medes would have implemented similar measures following the massive influx of Saka tribes to their country is not unlikely. Hinz (2008–2009), 65, has derived the name of present-day Sivand, a settlement located near Pasargadae, from Old Iranian **Saka-vanta*, meaning "Possession of the Sakas."
- 16 Assuming them to be authentic, the tablets of Ariaramnes and Arsames may attest to early Persian attempts to gain autonomy from the Medes, inasmuch as each document presents its subject as the "Great King" and "King of Kings" of Persia. According to Olmstead (1948), 29, the Medes brought these tablets as military trophies to Ecbatana, where they were later found.
- 17 For the importance of the assembly in early Median politics, see Herodotus 1.96–101; Diakonoff (1985b), 137.
- 18 Herodotus 1.99–1.100, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 19 See Diakonoff (1985b), 143–144; Medvedskaya (2002b). "Harpagus" represents a distorted Greek rendering of Old Iranian **Arbaka* ("Juvenile," "Child"), a name borne by a Median chieftain of the late eighth century BCE. Furthermore, the historical tradition

- preserved in Ctesias' *Persica* presents a certain Arbaces as playing a pivotal role in the fall of the Assyrian Empire; see Armayor (1978), 151; Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Arbaces." These earlier Medes may have been Harpagus' ancestors.
- 20 See Herodotus 1.123.
- 21 Herodotus 1.124, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 22 See Herodotus 1.109.
- 23 Ctesias (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 3) introduces a certain Parmises as the brother of Amytis, but because this individual receives no mention in connection with the Median succession, he was possibly either the son of Amytis' mother from an earlier marriage or, less likely, an illegitimate son of Astyages; see Diakonoff (1985b), 148.
- 24 This interpretation of the classical sources was advanced by Diakonoff (1985b), 142–148. What follows in the main text is essentially a summary of his view. See also Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Amytis."
- 25 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (8). For the Iranian rendering of her name, see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Amytis."
- 26 See Diakonoff (1985b), 141, 146–147.
- 27 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.5.18–8.5.20.
- 28 For the tensions between the Median king and the old aristocracy, see Diakonoff (1985b), 134–137, 141, 142–148; Medvedskaya (2002b).
- 29 The legend's emphasis upon the fact that Oebaras' name meant "Evangelist" in Old Persian suggests that he was in charge of Cyrus' propaganda. For Oebaras' bravery and military cunning, see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 5; *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (32–40). Memory of Oebaras' military prowess may have inspired references to him as a vaunted commander by Tzetzes (*Chiliades* 1.93) and Aeschylus (*The Persians* 984). These and other citations are discussed by Waters (2011b), who nevertheless considers Oebaras to have been a purely legendary figure.
- 30 For Oebaras' sinister vindictiveness, see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 6; *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (16–9).
- 31 The sources do not agree on when Cyrus decided to lead the Persians to revolt. Herodotus places him in Persia, whereas Nicholas has him oversee the preliminary steps of the enterprise from Ecbatana. At a glance, chronology seems to favor Herodotus, for the Sippar Cylinder indicates that the revolt commenced in 553 BCE, approximately six years after Cyrus was first installed as King of Anshan. However, because Cyrus spent these years consolidating

his power in Persia and perhaps trying to reach an understanding with the Babylonians, he may have made up his mind to rebel well in advance. If so, the situation may be compared with the build-up to the Macedonian invasion of Persia, which was planned by 340 BCE but not launched until 334 BCE. Herodotus (1.126) does not necessarily contradict the notion that the rebellion had been planned before 553 BCE, for he states that Cyrus declared his intention to revolt at a banquet at which he slaughtered “all of his father’s sheep,” the implication being that Cambyses was still alive or had only just died.

32 Thus, Dinon has Astyages “celebrate” Cyrus’ decision to leave his court for Persia; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 14.633c, translated by Gulick.

33 To understand the true circumstances of Cyrus’ departure, we must analyze the legend recounted by Nicholas – *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 (20–23). According to this legend, Astyages refused Cyrus’ first request to return to Persia under the flattering pretext that he could not stand to lose sight of him for a single day. More successful was a second petition, presented by an influential eunuch, who explained Cyrus’ requested departure on grounds that Atradata (Cyrus’ father in the *Persica*) was ailing and that he needed to offer sacrifice in Persia. Cyrus received leave for a period of five months. Although Nicholas presents these excuses as nothing more than contrivances intended to further Cyrus’ treason, they seem to contain an inkling of truth about which Nicholas himself is unaware. This is because the legend conveyed by Nicholas merges the character of the mythical Atradata with that of the historical Cambyses. The actual circumstances of Cambyses’ death were thus obscured, because the legendary framework required Atradata to die fighting Cyrus’ enemies. Thus, we may view the sequence of excuses given by Cyrus – first the alleged illness of his father, then the need to participate in some religious ceremony – as masked references to Cambyses’ declining health and the rituals surrounding his death. In particular, the five-month leave that Astyages granted Cyrus recalls the well-known Persian custom prescribing a waiting period between the passing of the old king and the crowning of his heir.

34 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 14.633c–e, translated by Gulick. Nicholas – *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 (26–30) – offers a variation of the tale recounted by Dinon. According to this variation, while Cyrus and his attendants were on the way to Persia, one of Astyages’ Babylonian concubines sang the Median king a song about a struggle between a daring boar and a lion: “The lion had the boar in his power, but let him depart to his own lair;

in his lair he will wax in strength and will cause the lion a world of toil, until at last, although the weaker, he will overcome the stronger.”

35 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.6.

36 For Cambyses’ mild temperament, see Herodotus 1.107. Nicholas has Cyrus’ father disavow his son’s revolt against Astyages; see *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (37). On the other hand, Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.6) makes him vehemently patriotic and anti-Median.

37 Herodotus 6.58, translated by de Sélincourt. See also Briant (2002), 522–523.

38 See Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 3; Briant (2002), 523–524. Regarding Plutarch’s claim that the ceremony took place at Pasargadae “in a temple dedicated to a warlike goddess,” presumably the Iranian Anahita, see Appendix IV.

39 See Briant (2002), 243–247. Herodotus (1.126) references the sacrifices and feasts following Cyrus’ coronation in connection with the Persian revolt. The Book of Esther (1:3–1:8) alludes to an Iranian tradition, whereby the newly crowned monarch held a weeklong feast for his nobles and laymen and displayed the glory of his majesty by serving all sorts of exquisite dishes.

40 See Herodotus 1.132.

41 For the Persians’ ruggedness and lack of refinement, see Herodotus 1.71, 9.122.

42 Herzfeld, (1947), 729, theorizes that Herodotus counted the Mardians, Derbices, Dahae, and Sagartians as Persian tribes not because they were conquered by Cyrus prior to the revolt but because they went over to him *during* the course of his war with Astyages. Specifically, he remarks that the names of these tribes bear a curious resemblance to those of nomadic peoples known to sit side by side at the southeast corner of the Caspian Sea (groups of these tribes had apparently settled there during the migration to western Iran). As a result, Herzfeld concludes that “Herodotus . . . heard [the names of these tribes] as auxiliaries of Cyrus against Astyages and . . . inferred from it that they were Persians.” Toynbee (1962a), 138–139, and Waters (2010), 67, speculate that Cyrus began attaching eastern Iranian tribes to his kingdom *before* his revolt against Astyages.

43 According to Herodotus (3.68), Pharnaspes had a son named Otanes, who helped Darius seize the throne, but the Bisutun Inscription gives the name of Otanes’ father as Thukhra. Because “Thukhra” seems to be a nickname, we have followed Cook (1983), 169, in recognizing Pharnaspes and Thukhra as one and the same person. Other scholars maintain that they were different

- individuals; see Waters (2004), 96; Brosius (1996), 54–55.
- 44 This proposed date for Cyrus' marriage to Cassandane is suggested by Cambyses' coming of age when Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BCE.
- 45 Herodotus 1.126, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 46 Herodotus 1.126, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 47 See Herodotus 1.127.
- 48 Herodotus 1.127, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 49 See Olmstead (1948), 37; Dandamaev (1989), 20. That the Median forces quartered in Harran and referenced in Nabonidus' Sippar Cylinder were only recently stationed there, as part of an invasion launched by Astyages, is suggested because the Medes are not known to have maintained garrisons in northern Mesopotamia, with the possible exception of Arbela; see Curtis (2003); Reade (2003); Rollinger (2003a), 291–305.
- 50 Babylonians, Aramaeans, and Chaldeans were the three major ethnic groups in ancient Babylonia, and the cult of the Aramaean moon god Sin was considerably different from that of the Babylonian deity of the same name; see Dandamaev (1989), 39–40.
- 51 Beaulieu (1989), 108. It is noteworthy that the inscription presents Astyages as the personification of the Umman Manda. Similarly, the Iranian epics identify Astyages with the fiendish Afrasiyab (Avestan *Frangrasyan*), the personification of Turanian oppression. See Appendix XVIII.
- 52 The translation is based on S. Smith (1944), 32; Olmstead (1948), 36; Beaulieu (1989), 108. Some scholars have interpreted this inscription to date Cyrus' conquest of Media to Nabonidus' third year (554–553 BCE); see Drews (1969); Balcer (1984), 95. Although it is true that the Babylonian Chronicle does not record events for each year of Nabonidus' reign, the layout of the text strongly suggests that Cyrus' triumph was included in the entry for the sixth year (550–549 BCE), and most scholars proceed on this basis. S. Smith (1944), 32–33, reconciles the apparent chronological disparity by pointing out that the verbs in the relevant Sippar Cylinder passage are written as future imperfects, such that the beginning of Cyrus' rebellion should be dated to Nabonidus' third year and Astyages' capture to the sixth year. The notion of a war lasting four years seems also to accord with the testimony of Polyaeus (7.6.1), who states that Cyrus was thrice defeated by Astyages before prevailing in the fourth encounter. Also, scholars disagree about whether the Sippar Cylinder's reference to Cyrus as a "little slave" indicates his subservience to Astyages or to Marduk; see Kuhrt (2007a), 57, note 10.

- 53 See S. Smith (1944), 32–34; Olmstead (1948), 36–37; Roux (1992), 384. Harmatta (1971b), 225–227, views the prophecy in the Sippar Cylinder as genuine and explains it on the basis that Cyrus had already established fruitful contacts with the powerful Marduk priesthood in Babylon. Boyce (1982), 43, espouses a similar view.
- 54 The existence of an alliance would explain why Nabonidus embarked upon his western campaigns without first settling matters with the Medes; see Beaulieu (1989), 104–117. The desire for Babylonian support may also explain why Cyrus waited so long after his coronation to declare war upon his grandfather. After all, if Cyrus deemed Babylonian support vital to his cause, then he could hardly have obtained the necessary assurances of assistance during the tumultuous period preceding Nabonidus' accession. We may also wish to consider the information provided by Nicholas of Damascus, who counts an unnamed Babylonian soothsayer (perhaps the legendary personification of the religious Nabonidus) among Cyrus' early companions; see *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (8–19). In Nicholas' narrative, this character is undermined by Oebaras, whom the cuneiform sources mention as the leader of the Persian column that captured Babylon. Specifically, Oebaras ambushes the Babylonian, while the latter sacrifices to the moon god.
- 55 See Herodotus 1.127, translated by Purvis.
- 56 See Diakonoff (1985b), 146–147. A number of scholars believe that Harpagus' defection only occurred at the end of the rebellion. The authority cited to support this position is the Babylonian Chronicle's reference to a mutiny in the Median army during the final year of the war that resulted in Astyages' capture. Although this reconstruction is certainly possible, it contradicts the sequence of events set forth by Herodotus, who clearly distinguishes between the two major campaigns of the war, the first led by Harpagus and the second by Astyages himself. Therefore, the mutiny mentioned in the Babylonian Chronicle likely refers to a subsequent episode of treachery in the Median camp. In connection with this point, both Herodotus and Nicholas seem to compress the events of the war into a single year. According to Herodotus, Harpagus' treachery outraged Astyages, who promptly armed all the men of Ecbatana irrespective of age and took the field against his grandson, only to suffer a crushing defeat and fall captive to the Persians. Similarly, Nicholas, who fails to mention Harpagus altogether, has Astyages respond to Cyrus' initial declaration of rebellion by quickly mustering an army and marching into the heart of Persia, where he is beaten and deprived of his crown. Fortunately, certain fragments of information better capture the vicissitudes that one might expect

in a prolonged conflict. Nicholas and Xenophon both hint at pro-Persian revolts throughout the borderlands of the Median Empire, while Dinon remarks that Astyages tried repeatedly to make peace with Cyrus before invading Persia: “[Astyages] kept summoning [Cyrus] to return [to Ecbatana] . . . it did no good.” See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 14.633d–e, translated by Gulick. The reconstruction offered in the main text attempts to reconcile these disparate accounts of the Persian rebellion.

- 57 For literary reasons, Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* transplants episodes from the Persian-Median war into the account of Cyrus’ feud with the Assyrians. Thus, Xenophon (4.2) tells of the Hyrcanians deserting the Assyrian king to join Cyrus’ army. This account must be presumed to derive from stories about the Hyrcanians betraying Astyages. The historical connection rests in Xenophon’s statements that “the Hyrcanians accepted [Cyrus’] leadership willingly” (1.1.4) and that “to this day [the fourth century BCE], one may see Hyrcanians treated with trust and holding office on an equal footing with Persians and Medes of high distinction” (4.2.8).
- 58 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (15–16, 45); Moses of Chorene (1.24–1.31).
- 59 In explaining why so many Medes and Median vassals readily followed Cyrus, Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 4.2.9, translated by Miller) provides: “Some had been friends of Cyrus in boyhood, others had hunted with him and learnt to admire his character, others were grateful, feeling he had lifted a load of fear from them, others were flushed with hope, not doubting that great things were reserved for the man who had proved so brave and so fortunate already. Others remembered the time when he was brought up in Media, and were glad to return the kindnesses that he had shown them; many could recall the favors the boy had won for them from his grandfather through his sheer goodness of heart; and many . . . went out from simple love of gain.”
- 60 For instance, Alexander, who arrived in Persepolis in mid-January, had to wait until May before advancing from Persia to Media; see Badian (1985), 443–444.
- 61 See Polyaeus 7.6.1, 7.6.9.
- 62 The numbers of combatants given by Nicholas of Damascus (*Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (30)), are clearly exaggerated: 1,000,000 infantry, 200,000 cavalry, and 3,000 chariots for the Medes and 300,000 light infantry, 50,000 cavalry, and 100 chariots for the Persians. The Sippar Cylinder mentions the numerical superiority of the Median army.
- 63 Compare to P’yankov’s theory, discussed by Frye (1984), 84, footnote 44, that Astyages invaded from Elam. As Frye notes, there

- is no evidence to support this theory.
- 64 Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.8, translated by Warner.
- 65 *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (32), translated by Duncker (1881), 350. Hansman (1975) suspects that the stronghold at Tal-e Zahhak in southern Fars may have been built at this stage in Cyrus' career.
- 66 Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 113.
- 67 The treatment of military casualties could have been tricky and time consuming given ancient Iranian purity laws. For example, some scholars have suspected that Xerxes spent much time at Thermopylae in 480 BCE shrouding his fallen warriors in branches to prevent their corpses from contaminating the earth; see Herodotus 8.24.
- 68 Polyaeus 7.6.9, translated by Shepherd.
- 69 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (39–44).
- 70 Mr. Masood Tavakoli, a resident of Shiraz, communicated this information to the author during a trip to Pasargadae and Persepolis in September 2011. Alternative locations for Nicholas' mountain may be sought in the passes to the north of the Dasht-e Morghab or at the Tal-e Takht, the hill within the plain where Cyrus built his citadel. According to Hansman (1975), 293, it is conceivable that Cyrus' citadel replaced an earlier mud-brick fortress, where the Persians could have taken refuge during the battle. However, the Tal-e Takht is relatively small and could hardly have housed an army of more than several hundred soldiers.
- 71 Nicholas' quasi-historical account makes the sacrifice more dramatic by staging it in the courtyard of Atradata's house, where Cyrus had grown up; see *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (41). Briant (2002), 240, interprets the ritual described by Nicholas as a sacrifice to the storm god Tishtrya.
- 72 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (42), as translated in Briant (2002), 240.
- 73 Justin 1.6, translated by Yardley.
- 74 Nicholas puts the casualty count at an astounding 60,000; see *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (44).
- 75 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (43); Justin 1.6.
- 76 See Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 69.1, *Concerning the Virtues of Women* 246a–b. One wonders whether the ceremonial presence of female warriors in later Achaemenid armies, as recounted by Quintus Curtius Rufus (3.3.22), bore relation to the women's involvement at the Battle of Pasargadae.
- 77 See Quintus Curtius Rufus 5.6.17.
- 78 Polyaeus 7.6.1, translated by Shepherd; Strabo 15.3.8, translated

- by Jones.
- 79 Kuhrt (2007a), 50.
- 80 See Diodorus Siculus 9.23.1.
- 81 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1. Duleba (1995), 20–21, connects this account to Ferdowsi’s account of Afrasiyab’s capture by Kay Khosrow, who lures the Turanian fiend out of hiding by torturing his brother.
- 82 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (45); Tuplin (2006), 7–8. Neither Justin (1.6) nor Polyaeus (7.6.1) mentions another meaningful engagement before the capture of Astyages’ camp.
- 83 In the Young Avesta (*Yasht* 15.31–15.32), the villain Aurvasara sacrifices to Vayu at the edge of the White Forest from his “gold throne, with gold beams, and a gold canopy,” with bundles of baresma and cauldrons of boiling milk, to avoid falling into the hands of Kavi Husravah (Kay Khosrow). According to Herzfeld (1947), 446–447, this legend was based on Cyrus’ victory over the Medes, thereby implying that Astyages fell captive after Cyrus chased him through a forest. Such a chase would not contradict the information provided by Nicholas, according to whom the Median army marched through a forest of olive trees before arriving at the mountain where the Persians made their last stand. The fleeing Medes ostensibly backtracked along this same path.
- 84 Herodotus 1.129, translated by Grene.
- 85 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 (45).
- 86 Polybius 10.27, translated by Shuckburgh.
- 87 See Polybius 10.27.
- 88 Herodotus (1.98) provides a fanciful description of Ecbatana as containing seven concentric walls, each with battlements of a different color. The Book of Judith (1:1–1:4) also offers a legendary description of Ecbatana.
- 89 For the symbolic importance of stripping a king of his armor in Cyrus’ day, see Isaiah 45:1. For Cyrus putting Astyages in chains, see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1. Roux (1992), 384–385, offers a translation of the Babylonian Chronicle that has the Medes shackle Astyages before handing him over to Cyrus. Various translations of the Sippar Cylinder also have Cyrus bring Astyages to Anshan in chains. The presentation of an enemy king in shackles represented a symbolically important act, as the sculptures and texts at Bisutun demonstrate. Thus, Darius often claims to have had his enemies brought to him “bound” (Old Persian *basta*). Cornelius Nepos (*Datames* 3.1–3.4) also has the fourth century BCE Persian general Datames bring the Paphlagonian rebel Thuys to Artaxerxes II in chains.

- 90 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.4.9–4.4.13, translated by Miller.
- 91 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 (45).
- 92 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1.
- 93 See Vogelsang (1992).
- 94 See Herodotus (1.130); Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1, 6; Justin 1.6.
- 95 Ctesias' story (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 6) that Oebaras secretly had Astyages killed by convincing the eunuch Petesacas to abandon him in a desert commands no respect and must be regarded as part of that author's efforts to disparage the inner workings of the Persian court. Isocrates (*Oration* 9.38) seems to follow Ctesias on the issue of Astyages' death.
- 96 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 10. Justin (1.7) provides that Cyrus gave Oebaras his sister in marriage and made him satrap of Persia. However, Babylonian texts indicate that Oebaras actually became satrap of Media; see Appendix V.

Subjugation of Lydia and Ionia

- 1 See Drews (1973), 7.
- 2 For 545 BCE as the year in which Sardis fell, see Wade-Gery (1951), 219, footnote 1. A number of scholars have given the date of Sardis' fall as 547–546 BCE. However, this date is predicated upon the assumption that the entry for Nabonidus' ninth year in the Babylonian Chronicle refers to Cyrus' Lydian campaign, and more recent scholarship shows that this is not the case; see Briant (2002), 34. Unfortunately, the entries for years eleven through sixteen are so badly damaged that an exact date cannot be confirmed based on this document; see Cargill (1977); Cahill and Kroll (2005), 605–608. Zawadski (2010), 146–147, has recently renewed the argument for identifying the object of the campaign referenced in the Babylonian Chronicle as Lydia. However, his argument is circular and unconvincing.
- 3 See Justin 1.7.
- 4 Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 2, as translated by Briant (2002), 33.
- 5 Specifically, Xenophon (*Anabasis* 3.4.8–3.4.12) speaks of Cyrus besieging the citadels of “Larissa” and “Mespila,” which should be identified with the Assyrian sites of Calah and Nineveh, respectively. He claims that the inhabitants of Calah surrendered when a large cloud covered the sun and that the people of Nineveh, who had given refuge to Astyages' wife, submitted after a supernatural thunderstorm. The Greek author Amyntas also tells of Cyrus besieging Nineveh; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 12.529e–

- 6 The allusion is to the rebellion of the Sagartian chieftain Chissantakhma in 521 BCE. Darius I had this rebel, who claimed to be a descendant of Cyaxares, mutilated and publicly executed in the Assyrian city of Arbela. Darius tellingly describes Chissantakhma's rebellion as having occurred "in Media." This demonstrates that Arbela (and presumably other portions of the Assyrian heartland) formed part of the Median satrapy. As this satrapy originally spanned the territory formerly covered by the Median Empire, Darius' testimony lends credence to Xenophon's assertion that a Median remnant held out in northern Mesopotamia, even though we may doubt whether Nineveh and Calah were occupied at this time. Consider also Plutarch's assertion (*Life of Alexander* § 35) that the oil springs of Kirkuk lay "in the province of Ecbatana."
- 7 Adapted from the translation given by Kuhrt (2007a), 50.
- 8 Adapted from the translation of Gadd (1958), 59. It has recently been argued that the inscription should be read as "land of the Medes" as opposed to "city of the Medes."
- 9 See Gadd (1958), 77; Burn (1962), 38–39. Compare to Graf (1984), 25–26, who favors a date of 543–539 BCE.
- 10 Briant (2002), 34, and Olmstead (1948), 37–38, both explain the end of the Persian-Babylonian alliance based on Cyrus' adoption of the Median imperial program. Von Voigtlander (1963), 194, has speculated, on the strength of a badly damaged line in the Babylonian Chronicle, that Cyrus' army attacked a Babylonian fortress soon after seizing Ecbatana and that this act of unprovoked hostility caused relations to deteriorate.
- 11 Herodotus 1.46, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 12 Herodotus 1.73, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 13 Herodotus 1.29, translated by de Sélincourt. On the extensive contacts between the Mermnad kings and the Greeks, see Balcer (1984), 53–93; Cawkwell (2005), 38–39.
- 14 Herodotus 1.53, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 15 Herodotus 1.55.
- 16 See Dandamaev (1989), 23.
- 17 See Herodotus 1.77.
- 18 See Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 6.1.25). Some historians are reluctant to accept Xenophon's testimony regarding a Lydian-Babylonian alliance, but the Athenian's claims should not be taken lightly, as he seems to have had accurate knowledge of Nabonidus' actions. See Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.5.2–1.5.3, translated by Miller): "At that time, the king of Assyria [Nabonidus] had subjugated all Syria,

a very large nation, and had made the king of Arabia his vassal . . . Accordingly he sent to all those under his sway . . . and to a certain extent also he misrepresented the Medes and Persians, for he said that they had intermarried with each other, and were united in common interests, and that unless someone attacked them first and broke their power, they would be likely to make war upon each one of the nations singly and subjugate them.” Xenophon was probably mistaken, however, in making the Babylonians mainly responsible for assembling the anti-Persian coalition, for Cyrus campaigned against the Lydians first. Justin (1.7.3–1.7.5) also alludes to contemporaneous Persian operations against the Babylonians and Lydians.

19 Herodotus 1.71, translated by de Sélincourt.

20 For Eurybatus’ treachery, see Diodorus Siculus 9.32. On Cyrus’ use of spies, see Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.2.9 (sending Indian spies to Croesus’ camp); Diodorus Siculus 9.31 (referring to an infiltration of Croesus’ army); and also S. Smith (1944), 33.

21 See Boyce (1982), 47–48. Boyce’s conclusion is based not just on developments within Greek philosophy but also on the reasoned assumption that the claims made on Cyrus’ behalf in Ionia would have resembled Persian propaganda disseminated in Babylonia before the invasion of 539 BCE.

22 See Herodotus 5.6.2; Xenophon *Anabasis* 5.4.32.

23 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.2.10, for the list of nations that contributed soldiers to Croesus’ army. Xenophon’s list is over-inclusive, however, so it must be treated with caution.

24 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.1.45; *Hellenica* 3.1.7, 16; Cawkwell (2005), 37. Xenophon knew the settlements as Egyptian Larissa and Cyllene.

25 When fieldwork was first conducted at Kerkenes Dag in 1997 and 2000, Geoffrey Summers, the archaeologist leading the investigation, identified it with Herodotus’ Pteria and declared it to have been built by the Medes. Subsequent analysis has indicated that it was not the Medes but rather the native Cappadocians or Phrygians who constructed the site; see Rollinger (2003b); Liverani (2003), 8, footnote 15; Roaf (2003), 19. However, this does not preclude the Medes from having occupied the city; see Stronach (2003a), 248; Tuplin (2003), 354, and (2004). Other scholars have identified Pteria with the ancient Hittite capital of Hattusa near modern Bogazkale; see Mellink (1988), 216.

26 The true scope of Median power in the west has been questioned in recent years due to the virtual absence of material remains datable to the Median period; see Rollinger 2003a, 2003b. However, Herodotus’ assertion that the Medes controlled Asia Minor east of

the Halys is explicit, and Vogelsang (1992) explains the absence of material evidence by emphasizing the hegemonic character of Median rule. Tuplin (2004) speaks of Median “domination” over Cappadocia, a concept that does not necessarily involve structured imperial governance. Duncker (1881), 389, cites the official genealogies of the post-Achaemenid Cappadocian rulers as evidence that Cyrus governed Cappadocia through a vassal king, Pharnaces, who had married the sister of Cambyses I. But these genealogies are unreliable.

27 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 4.

28 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.1.27–6.1.30.

29 See Diodorus Siculus 9.31.3.

30 See Herodotus 1.76.

31 See Polyaeus 7.8. According to this author, Cyrus’ defeat in the first battle owed to the valor of Croesus’ hoplites, and the Persian conqueror waited three full months before engaging the Lydian army again. According to Justin (1.7), Cyrus defeated Croesus at Pteria but waited to settle matters with the Babylonians before proceeding to Sardis.

32 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 3.3.18, translated by Miller.

33 Burn (1962), 41.

34 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 4.5.

35 Herodotus 1.79, translated by de Sélincourt.

36 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.2.15. Quite interestingly, the episode involving the heavenly light represents the only supernatural event described in the *Cyropaedia*; see Stoneman (1992), 280, note 2.15.

37 See Herodotus 1.80, translated by de Sélincourt.

38 See Cahill and Kroll (2005), 591.

39 See Herodotus 1.81, 1.84. Other sources provide less reliable accounts of Sardis’ fall; see Cahill and Kroll (2005), 605. According to Ctesias (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 4), the Persians cowed the Lydians into submission. They first executed Croesus’ son (whom the Lydian king had previously delivered to Cyrus as a hostage) before the defenders’ eyes (this murder supposedly caused Croesus’ wife to hurl herself to her death from the battlements). Then, on Oebaras’ advice, they raised pole-mounted, wooden mannequins of Persian warriors above the city walls, thereby fooling the defenders into thinking that their defenses had been breached. Polyaeus (7.6.10) mentions this last stratagem, as well as another one (7.6.3), whereby Cyrus coerced the Sardians into opening their gates by threatening to hang those of their relatives whom he had taken prisoner. According to Parthenius (*Love Romances* § 22), Croesus had a daughter named Nanis, who fell in love with Cyrus

and agreed to betray the city to the Persians, if only Cyrus would marry her. Nanis followed through on her end of the bargain by letting the Persians into the summit of the citadel, where no guards were stationed, but Cyrus reneged on his promise and refused to take Nanis as his wife. Parthenius' tale seems to have derived from an authentic Iranian legend, for a similar story appears in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* regarding Shapur I's conquest of Hatra in 241 CE.

40 According to Herodotus (1.84), the inhabitants of Sardis explained their failure to adequately protect the pertinent stretch of the city's walls with the following legend: an oracle had advised King Meles, the founder of Sardis, to carry a lion around the walls of his fortress to render them invincible; but the king did not take the beast around the area adjoining the mountain and so ordained Sardis' fall!

41 See Cahill and Kroll (2005), 595–597.

42 See Cahill and Kroll (2005), 603–604.

43 See, for example, S. Smith (1944), 36; Olmstead (1948), 41–42; Burn (1962), 42. The arguments that Cyrus had Croesus killed are usually predicated upon the Babylonian Chronicle's entry for the year 547–546 BCE, which refers to Cyrus' campaign against a country situated to the west of the Tigris during Nabonidus' ninth regnal year. However, not only does more recent scholarship indicate that this campaign was not directed against Lydia, but the verb used in the inscription to describe Cyrus' treatment of the enemy king (Akkadian *daku*, conjugated in the third person past tense as *iduk*) may be interpreted as “to utterly defeat” or “to crush,” rather than “to kill”; see Dandamaev (1989), 26; Lambert (2007). The fourth century CE Roman historian Eusebius (*Chronicle* 1.69) mentions Cyrus killing Croesus. But he does so only in passing and his passage is so late in time that one suspects poetic license or factual distortion rather than the faithful preservation of an accurate historical tradition.

44 Bacchylides *Ode* 3.23–3.62, in Kuhrt (2007a), 65–66. Herodotus and Ctesias also have Apollo intervene to save Croesus' life. According to Herodotus (1.85–1.87), Cyrus put Croesus and fourteen Lydian princes upon a pyre with the intention of burning them alive, but had a change of heart when he heard Croesus utter Solon's name in memory of the sage's admonition that a man can only be deemed happy at the end of his life; Apollo then sent rain to quench the flames, and the Persians removed Croesus from the pyre. Ctesias (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 5) maintains that Cyrus tried repeatedly to imprison Croesus inside the temple of Apollo, presumably to burn him, but that each time the Lydian king

miraculously escaped. These tales of divine intervention were probably spawned by Apollo's priests to obscure the god's betrayal – through a misleading prophecy – of their generous royal patron. Note that the accounts of Cyrus attempting to burn Croesus and his family were considered dubious, even in ancient times, for contradicting the Persians' well-known reverence of fire; see Mallowan (1985), 413.

- 45 See Herodotus (1.85–1.87); Ctesias (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 5). Olmstead (1948), 40, discounts Ctesias' testimony on the presumed basis that Barene represents a rationalized version of the mythical land of the Hyperboreans. However, Shahbazi (1970), 211, has shown that "Barene" was the Greek rendering of **Varena*, the Old Iranian name for present-day Gilan. The explicit statements of Herodotus and Ctesias regarding Croesus' survival trump any arguments to the contrary, as it is difficult to believe that Apollo's priests could have suppressed all news of the popular Lydian king's demise and that the Greek historians would have failed to mention such rumors had they heard them. See also Justin 1.7. Consider also that Croesus' progeny fared well under Persian rule and maintained close relations with the Achaemenid kings; see Herodotus 3.122, 5.121. 7.27–7.30; S. Lewis (1999). Because Cyrus would hardly have permitted Croesus' descendants to live, much less retain their riches and rank, had he caused their father's death – see Herodotus 1.155 – Croesus would seem to have received the same merciful treatment as the other kings whom Cyrus deposed.
- 46 See Shahbazi (1970), 211–212; Mallowan (1985), 413. King Gyges, the founder of Croesus' line, had been killed and his body desecrated by the Cimmerian ruler Lygdamis (who appears in Assyrian texts as Dugdammē, lord of the Umman Manda), when the latter's hordes sacked Sardis around 644 BCE. Croesus may have seen in the Persians the new face of the old eastern enemy and thus elected to immolate himself rather than suffer his ancestor's fate.
- 47 In fact, Cyrus had one very good reason for stopping the unrestrained plunder of Sardis. With old tribal rivalries presumably still lingering between the recently unified Persians, Cyrus would have wanted to control the flow of wealth to the Persian clans; see Herodotus 1.89.
- 48 See Herodotus 1.88–1.89, 1.53; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.4.12; Diodorus Siculus 9.33.4. Also Briant (2002), 36.
- 49 Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 33.51. The amounts of silver and gold given by Pliny might not be too far off the mark, given Diodorus' statement (17.71.1) that Alexander seized two thousand five hundred tons of gold and silver from Persepolis in 330 BCE.

- 50 See Dedeoglu (2003), 47.
- 51 See Herodotus 7.27; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 33.51. Pliny provides that Cyrus took the golden tree and vine to Persia, whereas Herodotus states that the Lydian Pythius, who was probably Croesus' grandson, made a gift of them to Darius I. These items reportedly decorated the Persian king's bedchamber at Persepolis; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 12.514f, 12.539d.
- 52 See Herodotus 1.94.
- 53 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.4.2. S. Smith (1944), 33, infers that the Cilicians were early allies of Cyrus against Croesus. Olmstead (1948), 39, states that the Cilicians submitted after Cyrus invaded their country en route to Lydia.
- 54 See Oppenheim (1969), 236–254.
- 55 See Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 7.254.
- 56 Herodotus 1.141, translated by de Sélincourt. According to Diodorus (9.35.3), Harpagus added a personal anecdote about how, as a youth, he had asked a man for his daughter's hand, but the man, thinking Harpagus to be unworthy, had denied the request; later, upon learning that Harpagus had become one of the king's trusted advisors, the same man offered his daughter in marriage, only to have Harpagus reply that he would no longer take her as his wife, but as a concubine.
- 57 See Herodotus 1.141.
- 58 See Cawkwell (2005), 32.
- 59 Herodotus 1.153, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 60 Diodorus Siculus 9.36.1.
- 61 Herodotus 1.153, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 62 See Herodotus 1.89–1.90, 209.
- 63 Herodotus 1.155, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 64 Herodotus 1.155, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 65 Herodotus 1.157, translated by de Sélincourt. For other classical references to the disarmament of the Lydians, see Polyaeus 7.6.4; Justin 1.7. Redfield (2002), 40–41, deems the account unconvincing.
- 66 See Dandamaev (1989), 29; Balcer (1984), 102–103.
- 67 See Weiskopf, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Asia Minor, Irano-Anatolian Relations”; Sekunda (1985). Strabo (13.4.5, 13) mentions a “Cyrus Plain” located near Sardis. Conventional thinking holds that the Iranian settlers of this valley appreciatively named the plain after the king who bequeathed it to them. However, following Toynbee (1963a), 652, and Eilers (1973), 8, we should entertain the possibility that the plain got its name from Kuru tribesmen, who had settled there during the nomadic migrations of the

- seventh century BCE or as a result of Achaemenid colonization. Note the existence of another “Kuru Plain” near Delhi and of possible Kuru settlements in Central Asia and Armenia.
- 68 See Herodotus 1.158–1.159. All quotations in this paragraph are from the translation of Godley.
- 69 Herodotus states that this voice emanated from the inner sanctum of the temple. Ancient priests used various tricks to cast voices or otherwise make it seem as if the gods were speaking.
- 70 See Herodotus 1.160. Plutarch (*On the Malice of Herodotus* § 20) cites Charon of Lampsacus as a more reliable authority than Herodotus regarding Pactyes’ capture, but Drews (1973), 26–27, puts little stock in Charon’s account.
- 71 Herodotus does not explicitly describe Pactyes’ fate, but the statement that he attributes to Aristodocus (1.159), who provides that Pactyes sought refuge with the Cymians “to avoid violent death at the hands of the Persians,” presumably foreshadows what actually happened to him.
- 72 For Harpagus’ title, see Diodorus Siculus 9.35.
- 73 See S. Smith (1944), 41–42, for the priests of Apollo at Magnesia being early “Medizers” (Persian sympathizers). For Cyrus’ use of Persian gold to bribe oracles, see Olmstead (1948), 43. Boyce (1982), 47–48, attributes the pro-Persian affinities of these oracles to Zoroastrian propaganda.
- 74 According to Herodotus (1.163), the Phocaeans were the first Greeks to embark on long-distant maritime expeditions and used their overseas connections to secure funding for the construction of their wall from Arganthionius, the king of Spanish Tartessus. Burn (1962), 46, accepts the tale as genuine.
- 75 Herodotus (1.170), states that, after Harpagus had subjugated the Ionians, the sage Bias of Priene delivered a speech at the Panionium in which he advocated that the Ionians abandon their cities and colonize Sardinia; the alternate proposal, delivered by Thales of Miletus, called for a maritime confederation with Teos as its capital.
- 76 Herodotus 1.169, translated by Godley.
- 77 See Herodotus 3.122; also Thucydides 1.13.
- 78 See Herodotus 3.13–3.15, 3.44.
- 79 See Herodotus 1.171; Strabo 14.2.27; Drews (2004), 139–148.
- 80 Herodotus 1.174.
- 81 Herodotus 1.176. Keen (1998), 74, speculates that Harpagus surprised the Xanthians before they could prepare their defenses by bypassing Caunis, the natural staging point for an army passing from Caria to Lycia, en route to their city.

- 82 For the likely resettlement of Xanthus by Median soldiers from Harpagus' army, see Bivar (1998), 12; Balcer (1984), 318. Keen (1998), 61–66, challenges the notion.
- 83 Herodotus 1.176, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 84 Gordion fell to the Persians after a brief siege, either during Cyrus' march to Sardis or, more likely, as part of a later mop-up operation; see R. Young (1963), 350; Devries (2011), 21.
- 85 Herodotus 1.177, translated by de Sélincourt.

The Sun and the Sky: Iranian Religion in the Age of Cyrus

- 1 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 6..
- 2 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 14.
- 3 See Herodotus 3.79; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 18. Despite the controversial nature of Darius' story about his rise to power, there is good reason to believe that he did eradicate these Magi; see Bivar (1975a), 104; Humbach and Faiss (2010), 3.
- 4 See Stronach (2003a), 235.
- 5 See Roaf and Stronach (1973).
- 6 Curtis (2005), 121–123. See also Brown (1990), 73; Ball (2012). Ball explains the closure of the temple at Tepe Nush-e Jan in terms of religious changes precipitated by the Persian conquest. However, he is inclined to attribute the work to Darius, on the somewhat arbitrary basis that Darius is the first Achaemenid king to praise Ahuramazda in extant cuneiform inscriptions.
- 7 See *Bundahishn* 34.7–34.8. The Islamic scholars Masudi and Biruni also provide chronologies substantially identical to that found in the *Bundahishn*; see Jackson (1926), 161–162.
- 8 See Shahbazi (1977), 33: 311 BCE – 258 years + 30 years = 539 BCE. See also Kingsley (1990).
- 9 For comprehensive surveys of classical references to Zoroaster, see Jackson (1926), 226–273; De Jong (1997).
- 10 See Herzfeld (1947), 1–30; Kingsley (1995); Vasunia (2007), 247–248.
- 11 See Shahbazi (1977), 34–35; Charpentier (1925), 749–750. According to Shahbazi, the 1080 BCE date agrees with the “national” chronology of medieval Chorasmia, which dates Zoroaster to the period approximately eight hundred years before the Macedonian conquest of Iran.
- 12 To my mind, comparative linguistics provide the soundest basis for dating the prophet. Grammatical similarities between the Rig Veda and Old Avestan texts, the vast majority of which appear to be the work of Zoroaster himself, suggest that the latter were composed

within a few centuries after the Iranians and Indo-Aryan separated in the early to mid-second millennium BCE; see Charpentier (1925), 754–755; Skjaervo (1995), 159–162. It is true, as Henning (1951), 36, points out, that languages do not always evolve at the same pace, such that the linguistic argument for dating the Avesta to the second millennium BCE is by no means dispositive. However, it pushes the point to the extreme to think that Old Avestan could have remained unchanged for centuries, while Young Avestan evolved at a more or less steady rate. Furthermore, an early date for Zoroaster would account for certain features of the Avestan texts, which supporters of the traditional date have not adequately explained. These would include the absence of references to the Achaemenid kings, under whose rule much of the Young Avesta must have been composed if one is to accept that Zoroaster lived in the sixth century BCE, as well as the complete omission within the extant Avestan corpus of Achaemenid administrative terms. This second omission seems startling for texts supposedly composed by peoples living under Persian rule, for Achaemenid administrative terminology penetrated the languages of many of the empire’s Iranian and non-Iranian subjects. Advocates of the traditional date have also overlooked that the Avesta itself alludes to a rather slow process of religious dissemination. One passage (*Yasht* 13.97) hails the religious expert Saena for gathering a hundred disciples several generations after Zoroaster. A hundred disciples is a paltry sum, if one assumes, as any adherent of the traditional date must, that at about the same time someone in the Zoroastrian community had converted the Achaemenid kings and the powerful Persian aristocracy. These considerations all point to Zoroaster having lived long before the Achaemenids came to power.

- 13 For a full explanation of the eastern Iranian setting of the Avesta, see Skjaervo (1995), 163–164.
- 14 *Videvdatta* 1.1–1.19. See Grenet (2005), 29–45, for the interpretation of the *Videvdatta* list as a migration. On the other hand, Francfort (1988), 168–169, interprets the list differently as referring to the boundaries of a political formation centered on Bactria.
- 15 See *Yasht* 10.14.
- 16 See, for example, Rapaport, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Chorasnia.” For other arguments on why Chorasmia should be identified as Zoroaster’s homeland, see Henning (1951), 44–45; Gershevitch (1959), 14; Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 103–104.
- 17 *Yasna* 46.12.
- 18 See Marquart (1901), 141, 155–157. Consider also Strabo’s mention (11.11.2) of the district of Turiva between Parthia and

- Bactria, in what was perhaps originally Chorasmian territory.
- 19 Indeed, many scholars believe that the name “Ahuramazda” originally served as the title of a mighty Indo-Iranian sky god – either Varuna or the mysterious “Nameless Ahura” of the Rig Veda – who became the main prototype for the prophet’s Wise Lord; see Zaehner (1961), 66, 67–68; Boyce (1975), 48–49, 50, 52–53; Malandra (1983), 44–47.
 - 20 Regarding the unity of Ahuramazda and the Amesha Spentas, Boyce (1985), 21, cites one Pahlavi text that likens the Wise Lord’s creation of the Bounteous Immortals to the “lighting of one torch from another.”
 - 21 According to Zaehner (1961), 50–51, the conflation of Ahuramazda and Spenta Mainyu gave rise to the notion that both Ahuramazda and Angra Mainyu were the twin offspring of the eternal time god Zurvan.
 - 22 *Yasna* 44.3–44.5, based on the translation of Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 65, 67.
 - 23 The Gathas also refer to Angra Mainyu as Aka Mainyu, or the “Evil Spirit”; see Duchesne-Guillemin, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ahriman.”
 - 24 See Zaehner (1961), 51; Schwartz (1985b), 681; Duchesne-Guillemin, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ahriman.” These scholars reject the notion that Ahuramazda and Angra Mainyu both existed at the beginning of time. Rather, it was the negative impulse of the Lie, and not Angra Mainyu, that was primeval. Compare to Boyce (1975), 192–194, who follows later tradition in insisting that Angra Mainyu, like Ahuramazda, was increate. See also endnote 21 above.
 - 25 This formula for ethical behavior admittedly appears first in *Yasna* 35.2, which belongs to the so-called “Gatha” or “Yasna of the Seven Chapters,” an Old Avestan text postdating Zoroaster by several generations. However, it seems reasonable to attribute the precept to Zoroaster.
 - 26 For the meaning of the noun “kavi” in the Avesta, see Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Goštāsp”; Skjaervo (1995), 169–171; Zaehner (1961), 37; Dumezil (1986), 44, footnote 4.
 - 27 See *Yasna* 29.1.1–29.1.6. According to Malandra (1983), 36–38, this song cannot be interpreted to recount an actual episode from Zoroaster’s life, because the lamentation of the ox-soul represents an archetypal literary motif signifying prophetic vision.
 - 28 See Boyce (1985), 12–14.
 - 29 For concise discussions of Zoroastrian eschatology, as transmitted in the Gathas, see Zaehner (1961), 56; Brandon (1975), 476–478; Shaked, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Eschatology, i. In Zoroastrianism

and Zoroastrian Influence.”

30 See *Yasna* 32.15, 44.2, 46.10, 51.15.

31 See *Yasna* 30.4, 32.13, 46.11, 49.11, 51.14.

32 Herzfeld (1947), 402–410, offers an admirable and valid account of the philosophical consequences of the Zoroastrian “concession.” Zaehner (1961), 62–78, discusses the reincorporation of the old gods in detail and also outlines Ahuramazda’s partial regression from an abstract deity to a pagan god. In particular, Zaehner emphasizes the similarities between the “devolved” Zoroastrian Ahuramazda and the pagan Varuna. Thus, the new Ahuramazda, like Varuna, was said to have had the sun as his eye and, for wives, the goddess of the earth (Spenta Armaiti in her pre-Zoroastrian guise) and nymph-like water deities known as the Ahuranis (the Iranian counterparts of the Vedic Varuninis).

33 Zaehner (1961), 62–78, emphasizes on linguistic grounds that the degeneration of the prophet’s teachings occurred close in time to his life.

34 See Taqizaeh (1938); Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 89, 93.

35 See Skjaervo (2005). In addition to the literary data, one may wish to take stock of the onomastic evidence. Darius’ father was probably named after Kavi Vishtaspa; see Boyce (1982), 41–42; M. West (2010), 5–6. Darius’ own name, rendered *Darayavahush* in Old Persian, has been interpreted to quote a Gathic verse (*Yasna* 31.7), which sets forth an article of faith referencing Ahuramazda’s possession of the best thought; see Herzfeld (1947), 97. This interpretation is supported by Hesychius’ statement that Darius’ name means “One Who Is Wise.” The names “Xerxes” and “Artaxerxes” have also been deemed to embody Gathic ideals; see Herzfeld (1947), 97–98.

36 Consider that the Assyrian kings invariably named multiple gods in their inscriptions, despite recognizing Ashur as the head of the national pantheon.

37 See Boyce (1988), 20. It is significant that this term is attested as a personal name during the reign of Darius I; see Boyce (1982), 15.

38 See, for example, Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscriptions a and b; Darius I, Susa, Inscriptions e and f; Xerxes I, Persepolis, Inscriptions a–d, f, and h.

39 On the multiplicity of creator gods in the old Indo-Iranian religion, see Boyce (1982), 131. Most striking is a late Young Avestan passage (*Yasht* 19.52) in which the water deity Apam Napat creates man. The Rig Veda also attributes creative acts to various deities.

40 Thus, Schwartz (1985b), 685, cites Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 10: “When Cambyses went to Egypt, the Lie proliferated in Persia,

Media, and the other Lands . . . those who became rebellious, the Lie made them rebellious.”

- 41 Xerxes I, Persepolis, Inscription h § 4d. Cook (1983), 69, speculates that Xerxes may have modeled this inscription after an earlier inscription of Darius.
- 42 Skjaervo (2005), 73–74, places great emphasis upon the Zoroastrian connotations of this term, as do Boyce (1982), 176–177, and Schwartz (1985b), 689. However, other scholars emphasize its significance within the context of the old Indo-Iranian religion; see Zaehner (1961), 67; Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ašavan.”
- 43 The counterarguments against the Zoroastrianism of these kings usually cite the fact that the Old Persian inscriptions fail to mention Zoroaster or to use Avestan terminology in all instances (for example, they used the term *baga* for “god,” rather than Avestan “Yazata”). However, the same phenomena are observed in the inscriptions of the Sasanids, whose Zoroastrian convictions are beyond doubt; see Boyce (1982), 122–123.
- 44 Cook (1983), 157; Skjaervo (2005), 80–81.
- 45 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 63. Boyce (1988), 27, interprets the Bisutun Inscription’s account (§ 63) of Darius restoring the *ayadana* destroyed by Gaumata the Magian as further evidence of religious similarities between that king and Cyrus.
- 46 See Boyce (1982), 52, and (1988), 28.
- 47 For the etymology of the name, see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Atossa.”
- 48 See Boyce (1982), 41. If we may trust the testimony of Diodorus (31.19.1), the sister of Cambyses I was also named Atossa, thus implying that the Achaemenids had already embraced Zoroastrianism two generations before Cyrus II. Even if not decidedly Zoroastrian, the proposed etymology of “Artystone” (“Pillar of Arta”), the name of Cyrus II’s youngest daughter, certainly befits a Zoroastrian girl; see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Artystone.”
- 49 In many cases, we do not know the exact ethnic compositions of the various communities to which disbursements for cultic offerings were made. For different analyses of the religious implications of the Persepolis materials, see Frye (1975); Boyce (1982), 132–149; Schwartz (1985b), 684–695; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 331–332; Koch (1995); Razmjou (2004); Henkelman (2008a).
- 50 It is, in fact, startling that the sacrifices dedicated to Ahuramazda do not even receive the largest share of rations relative to those of the other gods referenced in the Persepolis archives; see Kuhrt

- (2007a), 557–558. Of the approximately ninety known references to named deities in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, only ten are to Ahuramazda.
- 51 See Henkelman (2008a) and (2011b); Razmjou (2004).
- 52 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 72.
- 53 See Frye (1975), 64, and (1993), 144–145.
- 54 See Tavernier (2007), 165, 385 (mentioning a settlement named Indraka, or “Place of Indra”), 584. By contrast, names such as **Daiva-data* (“Created by the Daiva”) survived in other parts of western Iran even after the fall of the Sasanid Empire; see Zaehner (1955), 16.
- 55 See Boyce (1982), 143. The archives do, however, mention offerings to certain Indo-Iranian deities, whose names do not appear in the Avesta. Boyce has identified some of these deities with Avestan gods on the premise that the Persians venerated the latter under regional cult-epithets unknown to the eastern Iranian priests who composed the Avesta. In any event, the presence of these gods hardly detracts from the notion that the Persian masses had adopted a somewhat diluted form of Zoroastrianism.
- 56 See Herrenschildt and Kellens, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Daiva.”
- 57 See Mills (1906b), 244–245, 357, 371–375.
- 58 See Boyce (1982), 40, and (1988), 30–31.
- 59 See, for example, Gershevitch (1959), 16, footnote (†); Harmatta (1971a); Vogelsang (1992), 125–126, and (2002), 105. Boyce (1982), 12–13, 42–43, suspects that Zoroastrianism spread among the Persians due to political marriages between Persian princes and eastern Iranian princesses. In this connection, consider the theory of Toynbee (1963a), 652–654, that the Persian royal names “Cyrus” and “Cambyzes” bear testimony to ancient alliances between the early Achaemenids and the eastern Iranian tribes of the Kurus and Kambojas. For the possible Avestan ties of the Kambojas, see endnote 116 below.
- 60 Soudavar (2010), 119, draws an analogy between the rise of Zoroastrianism in early Achaemenid Persia and the advent of Shi’a Islam in Safavid Iran.

- 61 See Boyce (1982), 180–181.
- 62 Herodotus 1.131, translated by Purvis.
- 63 Consider also the Gathic description of Spenta Mainyu as “clothed in the most steadfast heavens”; see *Yasna* 30.3, translated by Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 105.
- 64 Herzfeld (1947), 458, states: “The Avesta as a whole has no ‘home.’ It is a compilation; where its redaction took place is indifferent; it was done in studies. The *Mihr-yasht*, too, has no ‘home’ – it took at least 700 years before it assumed its present shape. Nor was there an ‘Eastern Mithra’ different from the others.” De Jong (1998), 71, and Boyce (1992), 27–30, assume that the *Mihr Yasht* and other portions of the Young Avesta were continually adapted until the Achaemenid period, when they became fixed, due to the inability of the western Iranian priests to compose texts in Avestan. Gershevitch (1959), 22–26, and (1975), 76, states that the *Mihr Yasht* was composed in its entirety around 430–420 BCE.
- 65 This is because the authors of the text most certainly patched together different songs that had existed in pre-Achaemenid times.
- 66 See, for example, *Yasht* 10.2.
- 67 See *Yasht* 10.70–10.72, based on the translation of Darmesteter (1883), 137.
- 68 Zaehner (1961), 97–120, discusses, in detail, the non-Zoroastrian qualities of Mithra in the *Mihr Yasht*, and I have drawn upon his discussion heavily in this chapter. However, on the strength of the points raised by Thieme (1975), I disagree with Zaehner’s assertion that Mithra adopted many of these traits, particularly his martial qualities, after Zoroaster’s time.
- 69 Barnett (1975) discusses the likely representation of a Mithraic bull-killing on the cylinder seal of a fourteenth century BCE Mitanni king. The killing of a primordial bull also featured in the Zoroastrian creation myth, as described in the Pahlavi texts, and appears to have been a vestige of the old Indo-Iranian religion. It is perhaps noteworthy that in the Zoroastrian myth, the bull’s killer is Angra Mainyu. The interchangeability of Mithra and Angra Mainyu regarding this crucial detail underscores a point made in this chapter – that Mithra had a sinister side.
- 70 See Olmstead (1948), 98–99. The basis for this supposition rests in *Yasna* 32.10, in which Zoroaster condemns the evil man who “destroys the doctrines, who speaks of the ox and the sun as the worst things to behold with the eyes.” According to Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 122, the reference is to “the worshippers of Mithra who conquers the sun and kills the bull.” Zaehner (1961), 84–144, also speaks of Mithra (and his twin or alter ego Yima) as the key figures in the religion that Zoroaster sought to reform.

- 71 Herzfeld (1947), 543–561, presents a lengthy proof as to why *haoma* should be identified with wine.
- 72 See, for example, Taillieu (2002); Boyce (1985), 5; Zaehner (1961), 85–91.
- 73 Zaehner (1961), 84–85.
- 74 See *Yasna* 48.10; Zaehner (1961), 84–85. Note, however, that Zoroaster seems not to have proscribed the use of *haoma* altogether; see Cameron (1948), 8.
- 75 *Yasht* 10.1.
- 76 *Yasht* 10.135, translated by Darmesteter (1883), 155. Note that, in this passage, the term “god” is translated from Avestan “Yazata.” This does not necessarily alter our conclusion concerning Mithra’s unusually exalted status vis-à-vis Ahuramazda, for Ahuramazda was deemed the greatest of the Yazatas; see Boyce (1975), 192.
- 77 In later traditions, this triad presides also over the final judgment in lieu of Ahuramazda; see *Menog-i Khrad* 2.76; *Dadestan-i Denig* 13.3. Rashnu has been described as the “sinister” aspect of Mithra; see Zaehner (1955), 247; Brandon (1975), 477.
- 78 See Zaehner (1961), 108–109.
- 79 *Yasht* 10.78, 10.145.
- 80 See *Yasna* 1.11, 3.13, 7.13. In the Rig Veda, both Varuna and Mithra are said to have the sun for an eye, but elsewhere in the Avesta, the sun is spoken of as Ahuramazda’s most stunning avatar; see *Yasna* 36.6, 58.8.
- 81 See *Yasht* 10.125, 10.136. The notion that Mithra drives the sun across the heavens depends upon an interpretation of the sun as the one “golden wheel” of Mithra’s chariot; see M. West (2007), 205; Zaehner (1961), 10–11.
- 82 See Henning (1951); Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 15, and (1973), 105; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 342. Zaehner (1961), 69, 104–105, argues that Zoroaster’s unswerving animosity toward the adherents of the old religion and silence toward Mithra transformed the latter into the main deity of the anti-Zoroastrian religion.
- 83 See Herodotus 3.89. As this legend spawned before Darius I’s attempt to solarize Ahuramazda – see Appendix III – we may be confident that Cyrus deemed the horses sacred to Mithra rather than the Wise Lord.
- 84 See Soudavar (2010), 118–119; Daryaei (2013), 22. Stronach (1977) has further drawn attention to the labeling of Cyrus’ tomb as a solar house in an ancient Tibetan map.
- 85 Darius’ hostility toward the Medes is well-documented. Regarding Xerxes, see Diodorus Siculus 11.6.3.

- 86 The classical authors recount various tales that imply that the Persians received their Zoroastrian religion from the Medes; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 13.375, referring to Chares of Mytilene's recitation of a popular Persian legend that presents Kavi Vishtaspa as the ruler of Media. See also Lactantius 7.19. Boyce (1982), 42, speaks of a Zoroastrian college in Median Raga near Tehran that played a pivotal role in the spread of Zoroastrianism in western Iran, but her reconstruction is entirely speculative and assumes that the Raga mentioned in the Avesta is identical to the old city of Tehran, which is by no means certain; see Grenet (2005).
- 87 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 321.
- 88 For analyses of the theophoric components of Median personal names in Assyrian inscriptions, see Cameron (1936), 144, 153–154; Diakonoff (1985b), 140.
- 89 Indications of Mithra's exalted status among the Scythians and Sakas abound in the sources. According to Herodotus (4.59), the Scythians worshipped "Apollo" under the name "Goitosyrus." The etymology of the latter name demonstrates that the Scythian Apollo was none other than Mithra, because "Goitosyrus" means "With Strong Pastures," which title recalls Mithra's Avestan epithet, the "Lord of Wide Pastures"; see Herzfeld (1947), 516. For other Iranian etymologies of this epithet that seem to suggest a Mithraic connection, see Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 107, and Ustinova (1999), 272, footnote 38. According to Ustinova (1999), 272–287, Mithra-Goitosyrus was especially popular among the Scythian tribes living to the south and east of the Black Sea due to his role as the patron deity of the *Männerbünde*, that is, of closed societies of young male warriors. Ustinova identifies as a hallmark of the ancient Iranian *Männerbünde* tradition the temporary isolation of the warrior or warrior band from society. During this trial period, the isolated individuals resorted to forced theft to survive; see Strabo 15.3.18. Ustinova's argument makes much sense given that Roman Mithraism was exclusively a soldier's cult. Frye (1975) mentions a possible soldier's cult of Mithra at Persepolis during the fifth century BCE. Mithra's association with the *Männerbünde* recalls Zoroaster's opposition to roaming bands of cattle-raiding warriors.
- 90 Herodotus 1.216.
- 91 See Gershevitch (1975), 82–83, summarizing the research of Heinrich von Stietencron; Chattopadhyaya (1974), 4. 37. Abetikov and Yusupov (1994), 30–31, consider it to be self-evident that the Massagetan sun god was Mithra. Gershevitch (1959), 40–41, provides numerous examples of Mithra's identification with the sun in eastern Iranian languages and dialects, including Parthian, Sogdian, and Yidga. On the other hand, the word for "sun" in the

Saka language of Khotan was *urmaysde*, which clearly derives from “Ahuramazda.” Harmatta et al. (1994), 315, explain this linguistic artifact as evidence that the Sakas originally equated the sun with the pre-Zoroastrian Ahuramazda. However, Duchesne-Guillemin (1983), 902, argues that the Sakas only identified Ahuramazda with the sun in post-Achaemenid times, after the Saka solar cult had reached such pre-eminence that the sun god “eventually took the name of the sky god [Ahuramazda].” As to the identification of the Massagetan sun god with Mithra, I find the evidence of the Parthian language particularly compelling, given that the leading families of the Parthian Empire were descended from the Dahae, who in turn had strong ties to the Massagetae; Strabo 11.8–11.9. See also Herodotus 1.212, where the Massagetan queen swears an oath by the sun, thus recalling Mithra’s function as the god of contract; Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 75, where the Saka Tigrakhauda are castigated for failing to worship Ahuramazda. During the Arsacid period, the Parthian aristocracy espoused a form of Mithraism that granted such primacy to Mithra as to be incompatible with the Zoroastrian worship of that god, and this became the principal religion of northern Iran, from Armenia to Khorasan; see Pourshariati (2008), 350–391. History can, and does, repeat itself.

92 See Gershevitch (1975).

93 For the attributes of Nergal, see Bivar (1975a), (1975b), and (1998). The dog and the snake may have already been featured in Mithraic iconography before the Medes came into contact with the Mesopotamians; see Barnett (1975), 468.

94 See Bivar (1998) and (2005), linking the title *Khshathrapati* to Mithra’s complaint in *Yasht* 54–55 that, unlike other deities, he is not always worshipped by his own name. According to Zaehner (1961), 113–114, Mithra’s complaint is “no mere face-saving formula . . . for only Tishtrya, that is, the star Sirius, makes a similar complaint.”

95 See Schwartz (2010), 149.

96 That the Persian conqueror did so has been supposed by various scholars; see Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 111–112; Bivar (1975a), 104, and (1975b), 286–287; Boyce (1982), 43. The adherents of Ahuramazda had a sacred precedent for armed resistance against religious enemies. Zoroaster himself had sanctioned the use of violence against the Daiva-worshippers, and the prophet’s teachings on human fate and destiny must have further motivated his followers to brave the dangers of war in the name of religion; see *Yasna* 33.2; Zaehner (1961), 36. The Bisutun Inscription (§ 72, 75) demonstrates that the Achaemenid kings likewise justified military

enterprises on religious grounds. In recounting his campaign against the Saka Tigrakhauda, Darius states, “Those Sakas were faithless. They did not worship Ahuramazda . . . Whoso shall worship Ahuramazda, divine favor shall be upon him, both in life and in death.” Darius’ decree has been interpreted as a call to arms; see Holland (2005), 55–56. In this connection, it is tempting to link Herodotus’ statement (7.61) that the Persians previously went by the ethnic name Artaioi to the period of hostility against the Medes. This designation is clearly related to Old Persian Artavan (Avestan Ashavan) and meant the “Holy Ones.”

97 See Boyce (1982), 43.

98 See Duncker (1881), 372, on the Zoroastrian quality of Atradates’ name. Note, however, that the reverence of fire also had an important place in Mithra’s cult, as Mithra seems to have originally been the god of the fire ordeal; see Boyce (1975), 35–36. Thus, the Old Persian agricultural calendar, which some scholars have interpreted as the vestige of a time when Mithra was the chief god of western Iran, contained a month called *Aciyadish*, the “Month for Worshipping Fire.”

99 Herodotus 1.122, translated by Macaulay.

100 The legends preserved by Herodotus and Ctesias are thus on par with the stories that Cyrus’ propagandists circulated in neighboring lands, for a discussion of which see Boyce (1982), 41–49.

101 See Dupont-Sommer (1976); Boyce (1982) and (1990); Bivar (1998). Compare to Schwartz (2010).

102 See Bivar (1998), 13. It is significant that the title “karapan” does not appear in the Persepolis archives. Boyce (1982), 43, 172–173, argues that Harpagus was a Zoroastrian. She bases her argument, in part, on the theory that Harpagus bore relation to an eminent Iranian with the decidedly Zoroastrian name of Spentodata, who constructed a sepulcher at Xanthus for one of Harpagus’ descendants. This theory is highly speculative, however, as there is no evidence to suggest a familial link between this Spentodata and Harpagus; see Keen (1998), 62.

103 See Bivar (1975a), 103–104; (1975b), 286; (1988a), 515–516; and (2000), 21.

104 See Duleba (1995), 46. Both snakes and flames were common solar symbols that related to the notion of time closely connected to the sun; see Bivar (1988a), 519. Ningishzida, the Sumerian god of the underworld and a possible forerunner of Nergal, also had snakes emanating from his shoulders. Drijvers (1978) denies any Mithraic connection for the relief at Hatra.

105 See Ferdowsi *Shahnameh*, translated by Davis (2006), 9. Moses of Chorene also refers to Astyages as Bivarasp.

- 106 See Duleba (1995), 46–47; Herzfeld (1947), 372–373.
- 107 See Diodorus Siculus 9.20.
- 108 Curtis (2005), 122.
- 109 See Bivar (1975b), 279; Zaehner (1955), 7–31. Iran is a vast country with many isolated and remote regions, and traces of the postulated Median state religion are likely to have survived in areas where the central government exercised limited control; see Boyce (1982), 176. Bivar (1998), 56–64, demonstrates this point by emphasizing the persistence of non-Zoroastrian, Mithraic beliefs in the twentieth-century folklore of the Drakvandi tribe of Lorestan. As Bivar points out, the tribal name “Drakvandi” reflects Avestan *Drugwant*, or “Follower(s) of the Lie,” a name given to the tribe due to its pagan beliefs. Mithraic origins have also been claimed for certain religious practices of the Kurdish Yazidis. It is noteworthy that the Yazidis call themselves the Dasni, a word derived from Old Iranian **Daiva-yasni*, “Daiva-worshipper.”
- 110 However, some scholars consider the priestly Magi to have been a caste, unrelated to the Median tribe of the same name; see Herzfeld (1947), 124–125; Zaehner (1961), 163; De Jong (2005), 87–91.
- 111 See Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.32–23.6.36. Consider also that, according to the Bisutun Inscription (§ 13), Darius I slew Gaumata the Magian in the Median district of Nisaya.
- 112 See Herodotus 1.101, as interpreted by Schwartz (1985b), 697.
- 113 The propagation of Magian or Magian-like customs in the east is hinted at by the Alexander historians, who mention the practice of funerary exposure and close-kin marriage in the satrapies of Upper Asia; see Boyce and Grenet (1991), 6–8. Pseudo-Lucian (*Long Lives* § 4) identifies Magian priests among the Persians, Parthians, Bactrians, Chorasmians, Areians, and Sakas (as well as among non-Iranians, including the Arabs, Egyptians, and Ethiopians).
- 114 Herodotus 1.140.
- 115 Mongolian tribesmen practiced the same custom until recent times; see Moulton (1913), 224, footnote 1.
- 116 Herodotus 1.140, translated by de Sélincourt. Buddhist texts mention the Kambojas of eastern Afghanistan as having a religious duty to kill insects, snakes, worms, and frogs.
- 117 See the fragment of Xanthus’ *On the Magi*, in Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis* 3.11; Herodotus 3.31.
- 118 See Moulton (1913), 201–202. Compare to Boyce (1975), 297–300.
- 119 It is in accordance with this priestly function that Schwartz (1985c), 485, derives the name of the Magi to mean “He who propitiates a god (on behalf of a patron).” Another proposed

- etymology of similar import links the Magi's name to the Old Iranian root **maga*, believed to signify a state of liturgical purity; see Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 333.
- 120 See Diogenes Laertius 1.6. The transcendental journeys of the Magi Viraz and Kerdir are described in Gignoux, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Shamanism."
- 121 See Herzfeld (1947), 123–126, 202–204.
- 122 See Porphyry *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* 4.16; M. West (1971), 62, 242.
- 123 See De Jong (2005), 89–90, 93–94. The extant Avesta comprises only one of twenty-one books originally codified during the Sasanid period, and many more texts likely existed during the Achaemenid era.
- 124 See De Jong (2005), 93; Boyce (1979), 78–79. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets seem to reference a class of Magi known as the **fra-mazda*, whose task was to memorize religious texts. One consequence of this acquisition of literary information was that the Magi, in turn, became the "living books" of the Zoroastrian faith, such that, when Alexander massacred them after conquering Persia, the Zoroastrian community sustained an irreparable loss of religious knowledge.
- 125 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.1.23; Boyce (1982), 213–214.
- 126 It is tempting to interpret Herodotus' story (3.69) that Cyrus cut off the ears of Gaumata the Magian as evidence of actual tensions between the imperial founder and pagan Magi, but the tale was probably spawned by Darius' supporters to debunk Gaumata's claim to the throne, as tradition held that the Persian king could have no physical imperfections. M. West (1971), 239–241, has found evidence of an apparent mass migration of the Magi to Asia Minor and India in the immediate aftermath of Cyrus' conquest of Media. These Magian refugees were presumably hostile to Zoroastrianism. Further evidence that tensions existed between the Persian aristocracy and the Median Magi may be gleaned from the legendary tradition, recounted by Xanthus of Lydia, that the Magi held their wives in common; see Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis* 3.11. Throughout Persian history, this charge has been levied against enemies of the aristocracy. Most famously, the Sasanids accused the followers of the sixth century CE social reformer Mazdak of sharing their women. The polemical nature of these claims is evident from the propaganda that Azhi Dahaka established the custom of wife-lending; see Russell (1987), 42–43.
- 127 See Handley-Schachler (1998), 199–204; Kreyenbroek (2010). Handley-Schachler denies any Magian involvement in the worship of Ahuramazda, whereas Henkelman (2008a), 236, 529, observes

that only one of the eight officiants of Ahuramazda's cult named in the archives is designated as a Magian.

128 See Herodotus 1.132.

129 For the faulty grammar of the *Videvdā* as evidence of Magian authorship, see Zaehner (1961), 162.

130 See Schwartz (1985c), 485.

131 The Pahlavi texts contain many references to the practice, whereas the *Videvdā* contains one allusion (8.12-13).

132 The most emphatic statement of this view is by Moulton (1913), 226-253.

133 See Boyce (1975), 275-276. That the eastern Iranian Zoroastrian priesthood resented the Magian usurpation of the religious tradition is evident from the writings of the tenth century CE Moslem scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni, a native of Khwarazm. Surprisingly well informed about the origins of the Magi, Biruni states: "The ancient Magians existed already before the time of Zoroaster, but now there is no pure, unmixed portion of them who do not follow the religion of Zoroaster. In fact, they belong now either to the Zoroastrians or to the Shamsiyya sect [the sun-worshippers]. Still they have some ancient traditions and institutes, which they trace back to their original creed; but in reality those things have been derived from the laws of the sun-worshippers and the ancient people of Harran [that is, the followers of the ancient Babylonian religion]." See Kamaruzzaman (2003), 127.

134 See Boyce (1982), 68.

135 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Goštāsp"; Tabari *History*, Volume 1, 647, 691 (Leiden edition). As with other Islamic historians, Tabari's account of Iran before the Macedonian conquest represents a clumsy attempt at reconciling information in the Bible and classical sources with the Iranian national epic. Thus, in certain passages, Tabari mentions Cyrus by name as the Jewish or Elamite subordinate of an Iranian king from the *Shahnameh*; see, for example, Tabari *History*, Volume 1, 652-654, 718. That the identification of Cyrus with Kavi Vishtaspa predates such efforts is apparent from the historian's explicit statement (Volume 1, 691) that "some have asserted that Cyrus was actually Bishtāsb [Vishtaspa]." It is also evident from Tabari's first account of the Jews' repatriation to Israel. Tabari (Volume 1, 647) attributes their repatriation to Kavi Vishtaspa without so much as mentioning Cyrus' name. In a later passage (Volume 1, 652) Tabari recounts the story of the Exile and return as derived from the Bible, or a source familiar with the Bible, with the appropriate reference to Cyrus, who appears in this passage as an officer of the Iranian king Ardashir Bahman, Kavi Vishtaspa's grandson in the *Shahnameh*.

That Tabari repeats the same tale twice with no effort at reconciliation suggests that he drew upon two distinct sets of sources, one of which derived from an authentic Persian tradition that equated Kavi Vishtaspa with Cyrus.

136 The quoted text is from Boyce (1982), 68.

In the Paths of Heroes: The Conquest of Eastern Iran

1 Strabo 15.1.10, 15.2.9.

2 See Drews (1973), 22.

3 See Herodotus 7.62. Also Strabo 11.13.4.

4 See Gnoli (1989).

5 See Shahbazi (2005).

6 See Kent (1953), 170, with references to the pertinent inscriptions.

7 See the Elamite version of Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 62–63.

8 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. Pre-Islamic Iran.” Consider also Shahbazi’s observation that the empire’s Iranian provinces seem to have received a tax break in return for their military contributions.

9 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 2.

10 However, if we date the conquest of the Median Empire to 554/553 BCE pursuant to the alternate chronology suggested by Drews (1969), then we may follow Ctesias in having Cyrus complete his eastern campaigns before the war with Croesus.

11 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 39, where the king summarizes his account of operations against the Margians with the statement: “This is what was done by me in Bactria.”

12 Consider also the reference, in the *Bundahishn* (31.8), to Margiana as a country plagued by the invasions of armies and the oppression of horsemen, thieves, and robbers.

13 See Berossus Fragment 10a.

14 See Herodotus 1.177; Cook (1983), 30; Dandamaev (1989), 32–33.

15 See Dandamaev (1989), 33.

16 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.3; Mallowan (1985), 407. The tradition recounted by Xenophon may be apocryphal, insofar as it recalls the Avestan notion of seven *karshvares*, or “world-regions,” that comprised the inhabitable earth (the implication being that Cyrus conquered the known world).

17 Mallowan (1985), 407.

18 See Arrian *Indica* 1.1–1.2. Herzfeld (1968), 344–346, relies upon the scope of Mithra’s reach described in the *Mihir Yasht* (10.104–10.105) to argue that Median rule extended as far east as India. However, these frontiers seem too far-flung, and in any event, the passage in questions denotes the boundaries of the lands inhabited

- by the Aryans and not the frontiers of a single polity.
- 19 See Herodotus 1.154 and 3.117; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 2; Xenophon 1.5.2, 4.5.56, 5.1.3; Diodorus Siculus 2.5–2.7; Justin 1.1. Masson and Sarianidi (1972), 155–166, believe these traditions based on the development of complex irrigation systems in Central Asia during the first millennium BCE.
 - 20 For a discussion of these routes, see Holt (1995), 28. Consider also the flow of lapis lazuli from Badakhshan to Mesopotamia during the earliest periods of recorded history.
 - 21 Strabo 11.11.1 and 15.1.3; see also Justin 41.4.6, who refers to Bactria as the “land of a thousand cities.” Strabo derived his description of Bactria from multiple sources, the most important being Apollodorus of Artemita.
 - 22 See Diodorus Siculus 2.5–2.7, based primarily, if not exclusively, upon the lost account of Ctesias.
 - 23 See *Videvdata* 1.6.
 - 24 See Strabo 11.8.9; Ptolemy 6.11, 8.7.
 - 25 Herodotus 3.117, translated by Rawlinson.
 - 26 See Olmstead (1948), 47, footnote 69.
 - 27 See Le Strange (1905), 450–451. Le Strange also notes five major sluices that irrigated medieval Khiva.
 - 28 See Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Akes.”
 - 29 See Tarn (1948), Volume 2, 8, footnote 1; Vogelsang (1992), 207–208. Consider the Avestan description of the chief settlement of Areia as *Harewa vishrazana*, or “well-irrigated Herat”; see *Videvdata* 1.9; Herzfeld (1968), 330.
 - 30 As noted on page 29 of the main text, Herodotus seems to have made a similar mistake with respect to the Araxes River. The merger of two separate streams into one hypothetical river would account for the similarities between Herodotus’ account of the Aces and later descriptions of medieval Khiva, as well as the fact that Herodotus seems to have contemplated a stream located in mountainous terrain far to the south of Khwarazm. In the end, Herodotus’ Aces, with the clues given, “fits no more easily on a map than the Garden of Eden”; see Cook (1983), 195. But this does not mean that the underlying notion of a Chorasmian state is erroneous.
 - 31 See Henning (1951), 42–43; Gershevitch (1959), 14–15; Diakonoff (1971) and (1985b), 131. Compare to Cook (1983), 29, 195. On the basis of the identification of the Aces with the Hari Rud, some scholars have proposed that the Chorasmians came to inhabit the lower Oxus only during the Achaemenid period and that their original homeland was situated in Khorasan; see Tarn (1951), 478–

- 32 See Herzfeld (1968), 325–326; Rapaport, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Chorasmia, i. Archaeology and Pre-Islamic History”; Vogelsang (1992). Herzfeld (1968), 325–326.
- 33 See Diakonoff (1971) and (1985b), 132; Rapaport, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Chorasmia, i. Archaeology and Pre-Islamic History”; Francfort (1988), 168–169; Grenet, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Bactria, ii. In the Avesta and in Zoroastrian tradition.”
- 34 See Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies”; Yarshater (1983), 429–433; Bivar (2000), 24–25. When the Sakas occupied Arachosia and Drangiana in the second century BCE, they assimilated their own epic cycles with those of the Iranians; see Appendix XVII. Toynbee (1963a), 593–594, 615, proposes a less satisfactory derivation of the Thamanaean name. Specifically, he compares the name to New Persian *daman*, “skirt,” to come up with the meaning the “Borderers.”
- 35 See Bivar (2000), 25–26, and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Gondophares.”
- 36 Herzfeld (1968), 332–333, on the later history of the Thamanaean name.
- 37 See Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies.”
- 38 The quoted language is from Herodotus 1.177, translated by Rawlinson.
- 39 See *Yasht* 10.14.
- 40 See Toynbee (1963a), 651–654; Chattopadhyaya (1974), 4–5.
- 41 Strabo 11.11.6.
- 42 Most modern scholars interested in reconstructing Cyrus’ eastern campaigns accept this proposition, which makes sense also because Alexander may have planned his own advance based on information gathered about Cyrus’ logistics; see Mallowan (1985), 407; Brunner, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Iran, v. Peoples of Iran, (2) Pre-Islamic Period.” What remains unclear is whether Cyrus, like Alexander, descended upon Drangiana from Parthia and Areia in the northwest or, alternatively, from Kerman in the south-central part of the Iranian plateau. The latter approach is often neglected in maps purporting to show the major military roads of ancient Iran. Yet, the Bisutun Inscription (§ 45–47) refers to the Persian rebel Vahyazdata dispatching an army that fought its way to Capisa in 521 BCE apparently by proceeding from Kerman, and it is conceivable that this expedition followed in the footsteps of Cyrus’ army. Whatever the case, the evidence for Cyrus taking any one particular route is relatively weak, and alternate paths for his army’s advance have been proposed; see, for example, Olmstead

- (1948), 45–49; Mallowan (1985), 407.
- 43 See Tavernier (2007), 32.
- 44 See Cook (1983), 187; Christensen (1993), 238–239.
- 45 This follows Aurel Stein’s identification of Phrada with Alexandria Prophthasia and Kuh-e Khwaja.
- 46 Compare the description of Sarangian troops given by Herodotus (7.67) to the portrayals of early Medes in Assyrian art; see Olmstead (1948), 31.
- 47 See Boyce and Grenet (1991), 150–151.
- 48 See Gnoli (1980), 91–127; Hoffman’s theory, referenced in Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Arachosia”; M. West (2010), 25–26.
- 49 See Cook (1983), 188.
- 50 For the actions of the Magi during Xerxes’ campaign, see Herodotus 7.191.
- 51 On the Aryan cult of the sword, see Briant (2002), 240; Herodotus 4.62. Consider also that Cyrus was entombed with his sword. For the legend of King Arthur and Excalibur reflecting the same Aryan cult, see Brzezinski and Mielczarek (2002), 40–41.
- 52 See Ctesias *Indica*, Epitome of Photius § 4; Polyaeus 8.11.2.
- 53 See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 3.27; Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.3.1; Diodorus Siculus 17.81. Quintus Curtius Rufus incorrectly calls the Ariasprians “Arimasprians,” and Diodorus seems to confuse the episode concerning the Ariasprians with Cyrus’ alleged failed march to India.
- 54 See Darius I, Susa, Inscription f, referring to the Persian king importing ivory from Arachosia. See also Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 3.8.6, refers to the Arachosian satrap bringing Indian elephants to the Battle of Gaugamela.
- 55 See Cook (1983), 188, on the stabling of elephants at Bust.
- 56 See Strabo 11.8.9; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.61; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Arachosia.”
- 57 See Herzfeld (1968), 334–335.
- 58 Herzfeld (1968), 336–337; Brunner, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Abarsēn.”
- 59 For the name *Uparisaena*, see Vogelsang, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Gandhāra.” For Alexander’s trip to the cave of the Simorgh, see Diodorus Siculus 17.83; Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.3.22; Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 5.3.1–5.3.4. Note the potential Arachosian ties to the Paropamisus based on the *Shahnameh*, which has the Simorgh raise the albino infant Zal after his abandonment in the wild. This eastern Iranian tale parallels the western legend of Achaemenes being nurtured by an eagle.

- 60 See Herzfeld (1968), 337.
- 61 Indian languages are still spoken in some of the valleys near Kabul; see Vogelsang, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Gandhāra.”
- 62 See Herzfeld (1968), 336–338; Vogelsang “Gandhara” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*.
- 63 Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.92. Either Cyrus II or Cambyses II would seem to have rebuilt Capisa at a later date, for the Bisutun Inscription mentions Darius’ forces defeating the army sent by Vahyazdata before a fortress named Kapishakanish, which several scholars have identified with Capisa; see Bivar (1988b), 200.
- 64 This is the speculation of Brunner, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Iran, v. peoples of Iran, (2) pre-Islamic.”
- 65 See Arrian *Indica* 1.1–1.2.
- 66 Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 3.28; Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.3.13.
- 67 Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.4.27–7.4.28.
- 68 See Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.55.
- 69 See Diodorus Siculus 2.5–2.7; Briant (2002), 207. Certain details can be linked to stories about Cyrus. For example, Bactra falls to Ninus in precisely the same manner that Sardis falls to Cyrus in Herodotus’ narrative. Also, Ninus marries Semiramis only after putting her husband to death, just as Ctesias’ Cyrus marries Amytis after executing Spitamas. It is possible that Ctesias transmitted a legendary tradition that purposefully attributed the military conquest of Bactria to the Assyrians rather than to Cyrus in order to absolve the latter of any violent acts. In this connection, consider Ctesias’ claim that the Bactrians submitted voluntarily to Cyrus.
- 70 Consider also the case of Oxyartes, the most famous Bactrian noble in Western history, who was the father-in-law of Alexander. Oxyartes shared his name with the pre-Achaemenid Bactrian king of the Persica, and the recurrence of name across different historical epochs may suggest the existence of a single royal house, which retained local prestige after losing power to Cyrus. The tremendous influence that the fourth century BCE Oxyartes wielded among the Bactrians and Sogdians and his critical role in securing their allegiance to Alexander would seem to support this view. See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.1.5; Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.6.15; Vogelsang (1992), 230.
- 71 Assuming the text to be uncorrupted, Justin’s statement (1.1) that Ninus’ Bactrian adversary was named Zoroaster may reveal the religious leanings of the Bactrian royal house. Also consider the proposed link between the Bactrian royal name “Oxyartes” and the name of the Zoroastrian hero Ukhshyatereta; see Jackson (1926),

- 72 See Jackson (1928), 266. Jackson mentions the Balkh cypress in the same vein as the more famous cypress at Kishmar and the lesser known one at Abarkuh, also in Khorasan. The trees were often confused, such that Ferdowsi intimated that Kishmar was located in Balkh.
- 73 See Burn (1962), 70.
- 74 For the archaeological evidence, see Rapaport, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Chorasmia, i. Archaeology and Pre-Islamic History.”
- 75 See Herodotus 3.117; Olmstead (1948), 47–48.
- 76 See Herzfeld (1968), 322–323, for the Achaemenid administration of Bactria and Sogdiana as a single satrapy.
- 77 See Strabo 11.11; *Videvdata* 1.20, as translated by Herzfeld (1968), 326.
- 78 Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.8. See Strabo 11.11.4, for the inhabitants of Memicene being “fond” of Cyrus.
- 79 See Herodotus 7.43.
- 80 See the statement of Hellanicus, preserved by Stephanus of Byzantium, in *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 4.F65; Cook (1985), 254. An ancestral abode near Marakanda is also possible if we lend credence to the theory of Cornillot (1994), 104, that the name “Samarkand” derives from Old Iranian **Saka-Haumavarga-Kantha* (“City of the Saka Haumavarga”).
- 81 Cornillot (1994), 106.
- 82 Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 3. The supposed link to the Saka Haumavarga rests in the name of Cyrus’ adversary, Amorges, who should probably be viewed as the eponymous ruler of these Sakas in the ancient epics; see Vogelsang (1992), 189.
- 83 Ctesias dates this alliance to the years before the Persian conquest of Lydia: “Cyrus, assisted by Amorges, [then] marched against Croesus and the city of Sardis.” This chronology contradicts that presented by Herodotus (1.154), who describes the Saka Haumavarga as still independent following Sardis’ fall. As Ctesias consistently portrays the Saka Haumavarga in a positive light, the possibility exists that he recorded a legend that circulated while the Persians were on good terms with these nomads. The purpose of the legend would have been to credit the Saka Haumavarga with helping to expand the Achaemenid Empire. That certain Persian kings would have been mindful of appeasing the pride of the Saka Haumavarga is apparent from their military reliance upon these nomads. Herodotus (6.113, 7.96, 9.71) describes these Sakas as the best horsemen in Xerxes’ army and further states that Xerxes stationed Persian, Median, and Saka Haumavarga mariners aboard

the ships of his navy to ensure the loyalty of their non-Iranian crews. If Ctesias' story dates to a period of friendship between the Persians and the Saka Haumavarga, then, by the same token, other legends recounted by the classical authors must have been composed when the two groups were hostile; see Herzfeld (1968), 327–328.

84 See Trippett (1974), 80–81.

85 See Strabo 11.8.5. Boyce (1982), 49, and others locate this legendary battle in Cappadocia, because Strabo discusses it in connection with the rites performed at the Temple of Anahita at Zela, where Cyrus' generals reportedly scored a signal victory over the Sakas; see Strabo 11.8.4. However, Strabo explicitly states that Cyrus' victory was celebrated wherever temples to Anahita were located, such that the battle need not have occurred in Asia Minor.

86 Some scholars have explained the epithet “Haumavarga” to mean “*Haoma*-Turning,” in reference to the particular manner in which these nomads performed the *haoma*-burning ritual; see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Haumavargā.”

87 See Olmstead (1948), 48, with references to the primary sources.

88 See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.2.2., 4.3.1; Quintus Curtius Rufus, 7.6.16, 7.6.19; Justin 12.5.12; Strabo, 11.11.4.

89 For why Kurkath, rather than Urya-Tube in Tajikistan is the likely location of Cyropolis, see P'yankov, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cyropolis.”

90 See Olmstead (1948), 48.

91 See Olmstead (1948), 48.

92 See Vogelsang (1992), 231–232.

93 See Herodotus 3.102–3.105.

94 See Simons (1996).

95 See Herzfeld (1947), 734; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ākaufačiyā.” It is almost certain that the Persians had not penetrated these mountains before Cyrus' campaign, even though Marcianus Heracleensis (1.28) provides that the Pasargadae inhabited this region. This reference may arise from the confusion of similar or identical toponyms. The modern name of the Bashagard Mountains may derive from Old Persian **Pathragada*, in its generic meaning “place of safety” (an apt name for the secluded mountains), with no organic relation to the Persian tribe of the same name. Alternatively, we may imagine that groups of the Pasargadae migrated to the region at a later date (see endnote 45 on page 565).

96 See Herzfeld (1947), 734.

97 See Herodotus 3.93–3.94, 7.68. Olmstead (1948), 292, explains

this pejorative ethnonym as “Worshippers of the *Pairikas*.” In ancient Iranian mythology, the *Pairikas* were a class of beautiful, yet evil female genies, comparable to the succubi of medieval European folklore. The Persians supposedly equated these sinister beings with the desert spirits worshipped by the inhabitants of ancient Baluchistan.

98 However, grounds exist for believing that Achaemenid Maka was located in Oman, known to the Assyrians as *Maggan* and to the Greeks as the land of the Macae; see B. Anderson (2010); Cook (1983), 189–190. Compare to Hansman (1973). It is also possible that Achaemenid Maka straddled both sides of the Gulf of Oman, and that the Mycians and Macae were related peoples, as tribal movements across these waters have been attested in relatively recent times. In that case, it is questionable whether Cyrus could have effectuated the submission of those tribes resident in the Arabian Peninsula at this early stage, for he yet had no fleet. Assuming Achaemenid Maka to have extended into Oman, it may well have been Cambyses who conquered the Arabian country.

99 See Cook (1983), 189.

100 See Strabo 15.2.2. These dark-skinned aborigines may have been the so-called “Asiatic Ethiopians” of Herodotus 3.94, 7.70.

101 See Strabo 15.1.5; Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 6.24; Diodorus Siculus 17.81.1.

102 Most notably, Jalaluddin of Khwarazm’s attempt to liberate Iran from the Mongols in 1223 CE fell short when the bulk of his army perished in Makran; see Cook (1983), 189.

103 See Cook (1985), 213. Further underscoring the artificiality of these traditions is Diodorus’ merging of the account of Cyrus’ march through the Gedrosian desert with the episode involving the Ariaspans; see Diodorus Siculus 17.81.1–17.81.3. The theory of Rawlinson (1912), 27, that it was Darius, and not Cyrus, who undertook the disastrous march through the Gedrosian desert is equally unfounded.

104 Most attempted identifications of ancient Sattagydia use an etymological approach. According to Herzfeld (1968), 342–343, Old Persian *Thatagush* reflects an even more ancient form, **Sattagudu*, meaning the “Seven Rivers.” Based on this interpretation, a location near the Punjab, or “Five Rivers,” in northwestern India seems attractive. Alternatively, *Thatagush* may connote a “Land of a Hundred Pastures,” in which case Sattagydia could represent any locale just west of the middle Indus; see Kent (1953), 187; Bivar (1988b), 200.

105 See Magee (2005); Magee and Petrie (2010); Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies.”

The Fall of a Civilization: The Persian Conquest of Babylonia

- 1 See Will and Ariel Durant (1944), 665.
- 2 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 122.
- 3 See Bottero (1992), 105–137, 201–267, for a vivid description of this dichotomy.
- 4 See Skjaervo, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Aždahā, i. In Old and Middle Iranian.” Skjaervo maintains that “it is understandable that the Iranians, after they came into contact with Near-Eastern, especially Semitic culture, located Aži Dahāka, the big dragon, in Babylon, which must have been notorious for its dragons, in literature and artistic representations.” See also *Denkard* 7.4.72; Herzfeld (1947), 714–715; Geiger (1885), 45.
- 5 Quintus Curtius Rufus 5.1.36.
- 6 See Bottero (1992), 185–198, on “free love” in Babylonian society.
- 7 Herodotus 1.199, translated by Grene. Herodotus’ statement that every woman in Babylonia had to sleep with a stranger before she could marry is questionable. Scholars dispute whether ritual prostitution along the lines of what Herodotus recorded actually occurred, or whether the Greek historian misinterpreted information concerning sexual rites that temple priests officiated in exchange for a fee; see Yoffee (2005), 120–130.
- 8 Revelations 17:5. The Jews viewed Babylon as the prototype for all other oppressive imperial powers; see Bickerman (1967), 64. In the quoted passage, Babylon represents a metaphor for Rome.
- 9 See Herodotus 1.178; Oates (1986), 145–148. Herodotus speaks of Babylon’s outer wall as if it were a single piece of masonry; however, archaeological investigation has revealed that it actually consisted of three separate walls, made into one by packed rubble used to fill the gaps between them. The width of the three walls, together with that of the filled-in spaces, confirms Herodotus’ statement that Babylon’s walls were approximately 85-feet thick.
- 10 See Herodotus 1.179.
- 11 See Oates (1986), 145.
- 12 See Brinkman (1991), 8–9.
- 13 See Burn (1962), 49. Brinkman (1991), 7–9, notes that the Chaldeans were more sedentary than the Aramaeans.
- 14 This is the central thesis of Beaulieu (1989). According to Kuhrt (1990), (2007b), 110–112, and (2007c), 172–176, the notion that Nabonidus planned to reform the Babylonian religion derives solely from the Cyrus Cylinder and the Verse Account of Nabonidus, two cuneiform documents composed after the Persian conquest of

Babylon. Kuhrt accordingly argues that Nabonidus enjoyed good relations with Marduk's priests throughout his reign and that the latter only turned on him after Cyrus had taken over their country. In my opinion, Kuhrt errs on the side of extreme skepticism and downplays the apparent allusions, in Nabonidus' own inscriptions, to theological disputes with Marduk's priests; see Henze (1999), 60–63. Kuhrt also ignores the well-reasoned argument of M. Smith (1963) that the propaganda embodied within the Cyrus Cylinder and Verse Account was already in circulation well before the Persian conquest of Babylon; see also Von Voigtlander (1963), 179, footnote 28. Wiseman (1991), 244, rejects the notion that Nabonidus planned to subvert the cult of Marduk based on the Babylonian king's restorations of and contributions to the temples of deities other than Sin. However, as demonstrated by Beaulieu (1989), 140–141, Nabonidus exhibited greater respect for the cults of these deities during the early years of his reign, when he was not yet established in his power and could not afford to rebuke Marduk. One cannot deny that Nabonidus had his adherents and was not as universally despised as Cyrus' propagandists made him out to be, for both Babylonian rebels who opposed Darius I in 522–521 BCE claimed descent from Nabonidus. On the other hand, no propaganda is effective without a basis in truth, and even Wiseman (1991), 251, concedes that the slight resistance with which Babylon fell to the Persians proves the existence of considerable divisions within Babylonian society.

- 15 See Oppenheim's translation of the Verse Account of Nabonidus in Pritchard (1955), 314.
- 16 Adapted from the translation of Glassner (2004), 235, 237.
- 17 See Beaulieu (1989), 62–63; Dandamaev (1991), 253; Wiseman (1991), 248.
- 18 Beaulieu (1989), 208, dates this inscription to the period just before the Persian conquest, when the Akitu had been reinstated.
- 19 The effects of these conditions may be sought in the numerous business documents that attest to the price of food doubling during Nabonidus' reign; see Oates (1986), 133. Plague, famine, and, to a lesser extent, a shortage of food-preserving spices contributed to the inflation, as did the Babylonians' costly wars and construction projects.
- 20 See Fried (2004), 38, 44, 47; Dandamaev (1991), 264–265; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 122, 362. Also consider the Cyrus Cylinder's declaration that Cyrus alleviated the burdensome corvée obligations imposed by Nabonidus.
- 21 See Burn (1962), 34–35: "To [Belshazzar's] efficiency and his army, no doubt of loyal westerners, we may attribute the fact that

- sedition feelings did not break out in rebellion.”
- 22 Beaulieu (1989), 137–142, has argued that Nabonidus was extremely methodical in his archaeological pursuits. Specifically, Beaulieu has shown that Nabonidus only publicized his discovery of artifacts that belonged to the old Babylonian and Assyrian kings, because he wished to present his kingdom as the legitimate heir to the Akkadian, Old Babylonian, and Assyrian Empires.
 - 23 Daniel 4:33, as translated in the New International Version.
 - 24 Wiseman (1985), 103.
 - 25 See Dandamaev (1990), 40.
 - 26 Oates (1986), 133–134; S. Smith (1944), 38.
 - 27 See Dandamaev (1989), 42.
 - 28 On Babylonian collaboration with Cyrus, see Wiseman (1991), 248; Beaulieu (1989), 108–109; Oppenheim (1985), 540–541; Cook (1983), 31; S. Smith (1944), 33, 41, 47.
 - 29 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.6.1–4.6.2, translated by Miller.
 - 30 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.6.2, translated by Miller. In Xenophon’s confusing narrative, Nabonidus is generally referred to as the first king of Assyria, whereas Belshazzar is usually denoted as the second Assyrian king.
 - 31 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.6.6, translated by Miller.
 - 32 See T. C. Young (1988a), 39.
 - 33 See Briant (2002), 41–42; Cook (1983), 30–31.
 - 34 See Oppenheim’s translation in Pritchard (1955), 306. Glassner (2004), 239, provides a slightly different translation of the quoted text, stating that Gubaru became the “governor of governors in Babylonia.”
 - 35 See Dandamaev (1992), 103–104.
 - 36 S. Parpola (2003), 344–345, cites the example of the pharaoh Psammetichus I, whom Ashurbanipal installed as governor of Athribis under the Assyrian name Nabushezibanni. Of course, the presence of high-ranking individuals with Iranian names in the Babylonian administration is not unprecedented. Consider the case of Bagiazu, who was appointed the royal commissioner of the Eanna temple before the Persian conquest.
 - 37 See Olmstead (1947), 45. The basis for this reconstruction of events is the Babylonian Chronicle’s entry for Nabonidus’ tenth regnal year (546–545 BCE). The badly damaged passage provides: “In the month of Simanu [May–June], on the twenty-first day [*lacuna*] of the country Elammiya, in Akkad [*lacuna*] the provincial governor at Uruk.” Several scholars have identified “Elamiyya” with Elam, whereas others have identified it with the area around the settlement of Elammu, located on the west bank of the

Euphrates just south of Carchemish; see Beaulieu (1989), 201. If the illegible portion of the text mentions Elammiya and Uruk in connection with the same event, then a Syrian location would not fit well geographically.

- 38 For the theory that the Persians inherited the rule of Elam from the Medes, who, in turn, had seized the country from the Babylonians, see Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 61. Zawadski (1988), 143, asserts that the Persians took over Elam from the Medes but does not find evidence of Babylonian rule. For the theory that the Persians inherited the rule of Elam directly from the Babylonians, see Cook (1983), 31; Wiseman (1956), 72, (1984), 34, and (1991), 233–234. For the theory that Elam was politically independent of both Media and Babylonia during the pre-Achaemenid period, see Potts (1999), 306–307; De Miroshedji (1985); Henkelman (2003a), 182–185, (2003c), 254–264, and (2011b), 91–92. Waters (2008), 118, suspects that Cyrus’ ancestors subjugated Susa.
- 39 See Dandamaev (1989), 20; Waters (2008), 117–118.
- 40 Isaiah 21:1–5, as translated in the New International Version.
- 41 Wildberger (1991), 313.
- 42 Wildberger (1991), 314, indicates that the passage may date to the time of Second Isaiah and that it may reflect the position of Elam and Media as the “first in line in bearing the brunt of the battle when the Persian attack against the city [Babylon] commenced.” In this connection, consider Herodotus (7.210), which has Xerxes initiate the Battle of Thermopylae by sending the Medes and Susians to dislodge the Spartans.
- 43 See Kuhrt (2007a), 50.
- 44 Note the different interpretation of Wiseman (1991), 247, who suggests that Babylon was hostile to Adad-Guppi on the basis that official mourning for her did not take place in the capital until two full months after her death.
- 45 See, for example, Beaulieu (1989), 197–199, 201; Kuhrt (2007a), 53, footnote 5.
- 46 See S. Smith (1944), 42–45.
- 47 See S. Smith (1944), 45, citing M. Dussaud’s suggestions that the “Burden of Dumah” and the “Burden upon Arabia” in Isaiah 21 allude to this campaign.
- 48 See S. Smith (1944), 42. These tablets demonstrate continuous Babylonian overlordship in Aleppo from the time of Nabuchadnezzar II until the last year of Nabonidus’ reign (539 BCE); see Oppenheim (1985), 569, footnote 3. Cook (1983), 32, however, takes the position that all Syria was under Nabonidus’ firm control until Babylon fell.

- 49 See S. Smith (1944), 45. In this connection, it has been theorized that the years for which no entries exist in the Babylonian Chronicle were left blank due to the systematic removal of references to military actions that resulted in Persian defeats; see Beaulieu (1989), 199.
- 50 See Von Voigtlander (1963), 179, footnote 28.
- 51 Adapted from the translated in Kuhrt (2007a), 77–78. That this passage refers to an actual event is apparent from Nabonidus’ own inscriptions, which commemorate the king’s ability to read ancient texts that his priestly scribes could not; see Appendix VIII.
- 52 See the translated in Kuhrt (2007a), 78.
- 53 Isaiah 47:1–3, as translated in the New International Version.
- 54 Isaiah 41:1–5, as translated in the New International Version, with one exception: in Isaiah 41:3, I have used the Jerusalem Bible’s “his feet scarcely touching the road,” rather than the New International Version’s “by a path his feet have not traveled before,” because the former translation makes more obvious the allusion, identified by S. Smith (1944), 49–50, 159, note 5, to Cyrus’ rapid march to Sardis.
- 55 Isaiah 41:25–26, as translated in the New International Version.
- 56 Isaiah 42:1–7, as translated in the New International Version.
- 57 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 5.4.24.
- 58 See Wiseman (1991), 248. Compare to Dandamaev (1992), 54 and 154, who assumes that Bagiazu was probably the descendant of a Mede at the court of Nabuchadnezzar II.
- 59 See Fried (2004), 25, 28. The relevant passage is given in Appendix VI.
- 60 See Herodotus 1.188.
- 61 See Fried (2004), 26–28. The slow advance of the southern army may be surmised from administrative texts at Uruk dated to 539 BCE that cite Nabonidus’ rule.
- 62 See Herodotus 1.189.
- 63 Herodotus 1.189, translated by Rawlinson.
- 64 Cameron (1974), 48, bases his conclusion, in part, upon the Babylonian Chronicle’s entry for 540–539 BCE, which, as Fried (2004), 25, 28, observes, may not reference Persian activities in northern Mesopotamia but, rather, events in southern Mesopotamia, thus recalling the prophecy in Isaiah 21. Nevertheless, the Cyrus Cylinder confirms the rehabilitation of the Diyala region.
- 65 In analyzing the Cyrus Cylinder, Kuhrt (1983), (1987b), (2007b), and (2007c) has drawn attention to the importance of such negotiations by conquering armies.

- 66 For the view that the removal of the divine statues to Babylon constituted a means of cult centralization, see Dandamaev (1990), 44–45; Weinfeld (1964). Of course, we should not discount the notion that Nabonidus removed the images of the gods in order to punish his disloyal subjects, for the Babylonian king had been hostile to many of the temples that he was now denuding. He may also have sought to ensure the loyalty of his subjects, who dared not rebel if it meant the destruction of their beloved idols. Sennacherib had acted upon this principle in the aftermath of his brutal suppression of the Babylonian revolt in 689 BCE. On that occasion, the pretender to the Babylonian throne had received Marduk's blessing to rule as king, wherefore Sennacherib carried away the god's statue to Nineveh. There, Marduk was court-martialed by the other gods, rendered subordinate to Ashur, and held hostage for eight years, always on the verge of destruction, to guarantee the Babylonians' fidelity.
- 67 See Bidmead (2004), 124.
- 68 See Bidmead (2004), 125.
- 69 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 358; Quintus Curtius Rufus 4.3.21–4.3.22.
- 70 S. Smith (1944), 152–153, interprets these words as reflecting conditions associated with a siege. Oppenheim (1985), 548, more accurately interprets them as indicative of messianic hopes caused, in part, by Nabonidus' relocation of the idols.
- 71 See S. Smith (1944), 34. The Verse Account of Nabonidus also alludes to this military division.
- 72 The presence of Greek hoplites has been assumed based on a fragment (B.10) of a poem written by the Greek poet Alcaeus of Lesbos, who mentions his brother Antimenidas as participating in Nabuchadnezzar's campaigns against the Egyptians. Toynbee (1963b), 423, interprets this evidence to suggest that the Babylonians, like the Egyptians, had come to rely upon Ionian hoplites for the defense of their kingdom. By contrast, Wiseman (1985), 16, treats the Ionians' involvement as an isolated occurrence. According to Wiseman, Antimenidas was probably part of a regiment of mercenaries, originally in Egyptian employ, who went over to the Babylonians following Nabuchadnezzar's victories.
- 73 See Dandamaev (1989), 42.
- 74 According to the interpretation of the Babylonian Chronicle offered by S. Smith (1924), 117, there was heavy drinking among the soldiery on the eve of Babylon's fall, which, if true, may imply that they were under stress. However, this admittedly uncertain reading of the Babylonian Chronicle is nowadays ignored.
- 75 See S. Smith (1944), 47.

- 76 See Herodotus 1.190; Xenophon 7.5.1–7.5.15; Berossus Fragment 9; Abydenus Fragment 6.
- 77 See S. Smith (1944), 46–47; Burn (1962), 54–55.
- 78 Adapted from the translations given by Kuhrt (2007a), 51, and Oppenheim (1985), 539.
- 79 See Herodotus 1.191.
- 80 Herodotus 1.191, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 81 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.7–7.5.32, 7.5.58. Xenophon’s account is preferable to that of Herodotus, because Xenophon mentions the Persians performing excavation work in the depression just beyond the walls.
- 82 See S. Smith (1944), 46.
- 83 As translated by Grayson (1976), 109.
- 84 As translated by S. Smith (1944), 46.
- 85 As translated by Lambert (2007). Lambert emphasizes the Babylonian Chronicle’s use of the Akkadian verb *daku* (conjugated in the third person past tense as *iduk*) to indicate what had happened to the Babylonian army. Grayson (1976), 107 and 109, whose translation of the Babylonian Chronicle is widely accepted as authoritative, translates *daku* as “slaughtered” in this context but as “defeated” with respect to Cyrus’ victory over an enemy king, once believed to be Croesus, in 547 BCE. It is curious that many scholars insist that *daku* should mean “defeat” in connection with this earlier event – for example, Dandamaev (1990) 26, 47; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cyrus, iii. II The Great” – but that none, with the exception of Lambert, has raised the same argument regarding the Battle of Opis.
- 86 See Oppenheim’s translation in Pritchard (1955), 306.
- 87 See S. Smith (1944), 44.
- 88 Adapted from the translation of Glassner (2004), 239.
- 89 Daniel 5:5.
- 90 Daniel 5:26, as translated in the New International Version.
- 91 Daniel 5:30–5:31, as translated in the New International Version.
- 92 See Law (2010), 159–164.
- 93 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.15, translated by Miller.
- 94 Perhaps he is the same Gadatas mentioned in Darius’ famous decree regarding the priests of Apollo at Magnesia on the Maeander. Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 5.2.28) provides that Gadatas defected to the Persians at the same time as Gobryas because of an injustice inflicted upon him by Belshazzar, who had castrated him. Tavernier (2007), 185, maintains that “Gadatas” represents the Greek rendering of Old Persian **Gadata*, from the root **gada*, meaning “mace.” Other scholars have interpreted the Greek

rendering as an abbreviated form of Old Persian **Bagadata*, “Created by God,” from which the name of the famous city of Baghdad also derives; see Eilers (1983), 490.

95 See Beaulieu (1989), 226; Wolters (1995).

96 See Wolters (1995), 202. Normally sunset and moonrise occur simultaneously on only one day of the month and that is the full moon.

97 See Beaulieu (1989), 152, quoting an inscription of Nabonidus; Bidmead (2004), 136–139, footnote 28.

98 An alternative reference to Belshazzar’s death may exist elsewhere in the *Cyropaedia*. Few scholars have observed that Xenophon has Cyrus invade Babylonia twice, with each invasion resulting in the death of a Babylonian king. Thus, Xenophon’s first king of Assyria, who otherwise should be identified with Nabonidus, also dies in battle against Cyrus; see Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.1.8. This was not Nabonidus’ fate. Could it have been Belshazzar’s? The Babylonian Chronicle’s silence on Belshazzar’s demise suggests that he perished during a moment of confusion. An isolated execution following a bloodless occupation would have made headlines. Reports of a death in battle preceding the scattering of the Babylonian army, as well as perhaps revolts or massacres, may have taken longer to confirm. According to Xenophon, the first king of Assyria fell after Cyrus had routed his troops in the field and chased them across a ditch into their camp. One possible reading of the Babylonian Chronicle has Cyrus capitalize on his victory at Opis by taking plunder and inflicting a second defeat on the Babylonian army. This may have been the true context of Belshazzar’s demise. If so, the assassination story must have evolved later; Herodotus does not mention it, and Xenophon, who may have heard conflicting tales about the crown prince’s death, possibly tried to solve the problem by ascribing one such story to Nabonidus, the first Assyrian king of his narrative, and another to Belshazzar, the second Assyrian king. In that case, we may well wonder whether the confusion regarding Belshazzar’s death was what spawned Xenophon’s curious refusal to name either of the two Assyrian kings. In any event, Belshazzar did not live to see Cyrus enter Babylon. The unlucky prince may have wanted it so.

99 Adapted from the translations of Glassner (2004), 239.

100 Adapted from the translations given by Glassner (2004), 239, and Kuhrt (2007a), 51. For the reference to the anointing vessels, see Kuhrt (2007a), 53, note 10, which cites Kessler’s research.

101 See Oppenheim (1985), 542–543.

102 It is also possible that Cyrus postponed his entrance for purely superstitious reasons. The custom of delaying entry into a city

because of unfavorable omens was widely attested in the Near East, and particularly among the Iranians, as recently as the early twentieth century.

- 103 See Boiy (2004), 56–59. Herodotus (1.179) exaggerates this information to state that Babylon possessed a hundred monumental gates.
- 104 See the translations of Grayson (1976), 110; S. Smith (1924), 118.
- 105 See Oates (1986), 151.
- 106 See Genesis 11:1–11:9.
- 107 Herodotus 1.181, translated by Rawlinson.
- 108 See Oates (1986), 157.
- 109 Based on the interpretation of the Akkadian clause, “Cyrus declared peace [*shulmu*] to all of Babylon” as “the proclamation of Cyrus was read to all of Babylon”; see Oppenheim (1985), 539; Kuhrt (2007a), 51, 53, endnote 11. Because the Akkadian term for “peace” used in the inscription, *shulmu*, is a close cognate of Arabic *salaam* and Hebrew *shalom*, we may consider an alternate interpretation of the relevant sentence: “Cyrus greeted all of Babylon”; see Glassner (2004), 239; Grayson (1976), 110; Olmstead (1948), 51.
- 110 See Oppenheim (1985), 543, stating that “such a ‘king’s speech’ would fit quite well with the social climate germane to Persian kingship, and could not have failed to induce the Babylonians to expect an improvement of their political condition under Cyrus.”
- 111 Persian crown princes usually stood to the right of the king during state ceremonies; see Herzfeld (1947), 833.
- 112 Adapted from Oppenheim’s translation in Pritchard (1955), 306.
- 113 See Dandamaev (1989), 59–60; B. Anderson (2010). Beaulieu (1989), 180, footnote 23, mentions a Babylonian officer working for Cyrus in Arabian Qedar.
- 114 Adapted from Oppenheim’s translation in Pritchard (1955), 306.
- 115 Adapted from the translations of Cogan (2000), 315, and Finkel (2013), 4–7. It was the return of one such sacred idol to Susa that may stand at the core of the *Cyropaedia*’s romance of Abradates and Panthea. Widely believed to be pure fantasy, the story takes place during Cyrus’ war against Babylonia. In the tale, Abradates, the ruler of Susa and a former Babylonian vassal, falls captive to the Persians along with his wife, the stunning Panthea, the most beautiful woman in all Asia. Cyrus’ lieutenants offer her to their master as a prize, but Cyrus’ self-control and sense of propriety prevent him from succumbing to temptation. Instead, Cyrus frees Abradates and reunites the young lovers. The grateful Susian enters

Cyrus' service and commands the Persian chariots at the battle of Thymbrara, in which he is killed. When Cyrus rushes to recover his body after the battle, he finds Panthea weeping over it. She expresses guilt for senselessly exhorting her husband to bravery and attiring him in a brilliant suit of mail that made him a conspicuous target for the enemy and an object of jealousy among his own troops. Cyrus tries to console her, but she unsheathes a hidden dagger and commits suicide beside her husband's corpse. The tragedy moves Cyrus to tears and prompts him to construct a massive sepulcher in honor of their love. It is the author's opinion that this tale, which Xenophon insists is authentic, likely represents an allegorical account of Cyrus' restoration of a famous statue of Ishtar to Susa. The Semitic Ishtar, whose cult was recognized in Elam, bore the titles "greatest of the gods" and "exalted above all gods," which approximate the meaning of Panthea's name, "endowed with the qualities of all the gods." One widespread myth concerned the goddess' love for the handsome Tammuz, the Mesopotamian Adonis, whom she accidentally drives to death and follows into the netherworld. Panthea does substantially the same thing to Abradates in the *Cyropaedia*. More importantly, Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 4.6.11) calls Panthea the "Lady of Susa," an epithet borne by Ishtar since Assyrian times. An inscription of Nabuchadnezzar attests to that king's respect for, and possession of, an idol belonging to "Ishtar, the Lady of Elam, the princess who dwells in Susa"; see Potts (1999), 294. This idol, which one of Nabuchadnezzar's successors likely displaced, seemingly represents the star-crossed beauty of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. The prevalence of such allegorical tales in the ancient East has been demonstrated in connection with the biblical story of Esther, the main characters of which – Esther, Mordecai, and Haman – represent personifications of the deities Ishtar, Marduk, and Haman, respectively; see Dalley (2007).

116 Adapted from Oppenheim's translation in Pritchard (1955), 315.

117 Adapted from the translations of Grayson (1976), 111, and Oppenheim, in Pritchard (1955), 306. Note that Oppenheim translates the text to provide that the people walked about with their hair disheveled, whereas Grayson states that they "bared" (perhaps, meaning shaved) their heads; see also Kuhrt (2007a), 51.

118 See Herodotus 2.1.

119 See Boyce (1982), 59.

120 The Babylonian Chronicle does not explicitly identify the ceremony Cambyses attended as the Akitu, but this is to be inferred; see Bidmead (2004), 140.

121 See Oppenheim (1985), 556–557: "Was Cambyses' behaviour a

premeditated attempt to reject the ceremonial of a foreign religion, prompted by the prince's unwillingness to conform to the culture of the defeated, or was it a lapse due to the youth of the prince or the novelty of the situation?" Note that the relevant lines of the Babylonian Chronicle are badly damaged and subject to different readings. Whereas Oppenheim does not mention Cyrus' participation in the ritual, George (1996), 379–380, and Sekunda (2010), 264, propose that Cyrus presided over his son's investiture and that it was, in fact, Cyrus who donned Elamite attire. Kuhrt (2007a), 51, (2007b), 114–115, and (2007c), 177–178, who also reads the text to allude to Cyrus' Elamite dress, interprets the choice of attire as a deliberate measure aimed at reminding the Babylonians of their subjugation; but if Cyrus truly harbored such intent, one must wonder why he insisted upon performing the ritual in the first place. Cardascia, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Babylon, under the Achaemenids," maintains that Cyrus, and not Cambyses, took Marduk's hand.

122 For administrative continuities between the Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires, see Jursa (2007); Fried (2004), 31–35; Kuhrt (2007a), 80, note 23.

123 See Mallowan (1985), 412–413.

124 See Kuhrt (1988), 127

125 See Kuhrt (1988), 127

126 On the vast power of Gobryas, Whitcomb (1963), 29–42; Olmstead (1948), 56; Dandamaev (1992), 78, noting that "the competence of Gubāru was very great and was not restricted to the administrative functions of a governor. In particular, he exercised authority over Babylonian temples, which for many centuries had enjoyed self-government."

127 Oppenheim (1985), 558, speculates that Cambyses resided at Sippar from 535 BCE to 530 BCE while Gobryas administered the province.

128 Lewy (1962), 159–162, goes so far as to state that Cyrus became a devotee of Sin due to the superstitious belief that his neglect of this deity prompted the deaths of Ugbaru and Cassandane. Lewy downplays the importance of regional variations in the Babylonian religion. Cyrus probably honored Sin only in cities such as Harran and Ur, where the moon god had traditionally been the focal point of worship; see Bickerman (1946), 263–264.

129 See Keller (1980), 328. Consider also another inscription of Cyrus from Ur, inscribed with the text: "Cyrus, King of All, King of Anshan, son of Cambyses, King of Anshan: The gods have delivered all the lands into my hand; the land I have made to swell in a peaceful habitation." See Mallowan (1985), 412, footnote 4.

130 See Berossus Fragment 9 and the pertinent passage from the Dynastic Prophecy in Appendix IX.

131 See Herzfeld (1968), 174.

The Lord's Anointed: Cyrus and Israel

1 Jeremiah 46:25–46:26, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.

2 See Jeremiah 52:28. The number of Judeans taken into exile is the subject of much debate among Old Testament scholars. I have followed the careful analysis of Ackroyd (1975), 22–23, footnote 24, who concludes that the Babylonians removed no more than 20,000 to 30,000 deportees (including women and children) between 597 BCE and 581 BCE.

3 2 Kings 25:3. The “Goblet of God’s wrath” is mentioned in Isaiah 51:17 and 51:22.

4 Lamentations 2:11–2:12.

5 See Stern (2001), 303–311.

6 See Weinfeld (1964).

7 See, for example, 1 Samuel 26:19; 2 Kings 3:27, 5:17; Psalm 82, 95; Vriezen (1967), 81–83; G. Carter (1918), 47–48.

8 See Bickerman (1984), 351–354.

9 Lamentations 3:41–3:42, translated by the International Bible Society.

10 See Bickerman (1988), 47–48; Ackroyd (1970), 32.

11 Psalms 137:9, translated by the International Bible Society.

12 Burn (1962), 50.

13 S. Smith (1944), 167, footnote 36. For Second Isaiah’s place of residence, see Bittenwieser (1919); S. Smith (1944), 176, footnote. 64; Ackroyd (1970), 22. Some have argued that Second Isaiah did not live at the time of Cyrus but was a contemporary of Nehemiah, who flourished during the middle of the fifth century BCE. However, Fried (2002) has admirably defended the traditional view that Second Isaiah and Cyrus were contemporaries.

14 Isaiah 41:1–41:5. The analysis of Second Isaiah that follows in the main text is derived primarily from the authoritative study of S. Smith (1944). Netzer (1974) echoes most of Smith’s interpretations.

15 Isaiah 41:25–41:26, translated by the International Bible Society. Note that S. Smith (1944), 51, substitutes “governor” for “ruler” and interprets the entire passage to refer to Cyrus’ conquest of Babylonian provinces in Syria.

16 Isaiah 41:26, translated by the International Bible Society.

17 See S. Smith (1944), 52.

18 Based on S. Smith (1944), 51.

- 19 Isaiah 41:27, as translated by S. Smith (1944), 53–54.
- 20 See S. Smith (1944), 54.
- 21 According to Simcox (1937), 158, footnote 5, Second Isaiah provides the first reference to Yahweh selecting his Messiah. Simcox views this detail as “a very strong indication” that Babylonian royal and literary conventions influenced Second Isaiah’s compositions.
- 22 See Waterhouse (1934), 121; Burn (1962), 52. On the importance of the law in Achaemenid royal ideology, see Briant (2002), 511.
- 23 Paul (1968), 185–186, links the imagery used in this and other related passages belonging to Second Isaiah to Jeremiah 1:5, where Jeremiah claims to have been a “prophet to the nations.” Paul’s contention is that Second Isaiah here refers to the nation of Israel and not to Cyrus.
- 24 See Isaiah 53:14–53:17, as interpreted by S. Smith (1944), 71–72. M. Smith (1963), 417, footnote 10, rejects S. Smith’s hypothesis regarding Persian campaigns in Syria and Palestine before the fall of Babylon.
- 25 Isaiah 46:1–46:2, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 26 Isaiah 46:8–46:13, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 27 Isaiah 45:1–45:7, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 28 S. Smith (1944), 73.
- 29 S. Smith (1944), 73.
- 30 See S. Smith (1944), 73, who mentions Ashurbanipal’s discovery of subterranean treasures at Susa and the efforts of Darius and Xerxes to locate precious stores in the underground tombs and temples of Babylon.
- 31 Fried (2002) has convincingly demonstrated that this was the traditional view of the title at the time of Cyrus and Second Isaiah.
- 32 See Burn (1962), 52; Smith (1944), 73–75. Goulder (2002) has recently identified Second Isaiah’s Suffering Servant as the exiled king Jehoiakin.
- 33 See Isaiah 44:24–44:28, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 34 See Ezra 1:1–1:4; 2 Chronicles 36:23.
- 35 See Ezra 1:2 and 6:3. Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of these edicts; see, for example, Bedford (2001), 85–182; Grabbe (2006), 342–343; Kuhrt (2007d), 136. However, Bickerman (1946) has convincingly demonstrated that the two documents were drafted independently of one another and are, therefore, genuine. The Aramaic version represents the official decree of the royal chancellery, whereas the Hebrew version represents the local proclamation delivered in Jerusalem. Olmstead

- (1948), 57–58, 240, also accepts the two edicts as genuine. Ultimately, it does not matter whether the edicts are genuine or not, for as the analysis of M. Smith (1971), 78–81, demonstrates, no reliable passages in the Old Testament deny the Exiles’ return under Cyrus.
- 36 Ezra 1:2, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 37 See Ezra 1:7–1:11, 5:14–5:16; Olmstead (1948), 57–58. Williamson (1991) deems the biblical account of the dispensation of the vessels to be reliable based on administrative practices attested in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.
- 38 For the Babylonian contract, see Briant (2002), 64.
- 39 Ezra 1:8; Stern (1984a), 70.
- 40 The number of exiles that returned and the total population of Judah during the Achaemenid period remain uncertain. The Books of Ezra (2.64–2.65) and Nehemiah (7:66) indicate that some 50,000 men, women, and children made the trek home by the mid-fifth century BCE. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence indicates that the population of Judah never exceeded 20,000 during the Achaemenid period; see Blenkinsopp (1988), 83; C. Carter (1999), 200; Finkelstein (2010).
- 41 See Flavius Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 11.1.3; Bickerman (1946), 262, and (1984), 348.
- 42 Isaiah 60:1–60:5, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 43 Burn (1962), 57.
- 44 Ezra 2:68–2:69
- 45 Ezra 2:70.
- 46 For a rationalization of the garbled chronology of Ezra 3, see Fried (2004), 174. Steinman (2008) argues, based on the sabbatical year cycles of the post-Exilic era, that the exiles did not return to Jerusalem until 533 BCE. In relevant part, he states that “it is unlikely that the returnees simply dropped everything in order to return. There was property to sell, accounts to settle, travel arrangements to be made.” Such a lengthy delay could explain the opposition that the repatriated Jews allegedly encountered after Cyrus’ reign, for the regional commanders of Syria and the Levant may have forgotten about the edict or considered it stale.
- 47 Ezra 3:10–3:13, translated by the International Bible Society.
- 48 Despite Cyrus’ endorsement, the task of reconstruction did not proceed smoothly. To begin, the Babylonians had allowed Judah and the rest of Palestine to fall into complete dilapidation. They had intentionally diverted all international trade away from Palestine and never built anything of consequence there; see Stern (2001), 350. As a result, the exiles returned home to an utter

wasteland, underpopulated and completely lacking in infrastructure. Thus, for many years, the work of reconstructing the temple was secondary to the more critical task of establishing conditions conducive to supporting a sizable work force. Furthermore, early opposition to the project came from the pagan Samaritans. According to the somewhat dubious tradition preserved in the Book of Ezra, the Samaritans had taken a keen interest in the reconstruction of the Temple, because they were accustomed to worshipping Yahweh as the local god of Judah ever since Esarhaddon had brought them to Palestine in the seventh century BCE. They continued to worship their own national gods, of course, for which reason the repatriated Jews rejected their participation, saying: “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the King of Persia, commanded us”; see Ezra 4:1–4:2. Thus rebuked, the Samaritans resolved to frustrate the project. During the reign of Cambyses II, the Samaritans seem to have threatened violence and hired counselors to oppose the interests of the Jews before Sheshbazzar’s superiors; see Flavius Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 2.249, 2.315; Ezra 4:5. Such machinations caused the reconstruction to languish for several years, during which many Jews preferred to adorn their own houses rather than the Lord’s, citing, as an excuse, that the time had not yet come for the Temple to be rebuilt. This raised the ire of nationalists like the prophet Haggai, who chastised Jerusalem’s inhabitants for their selfishness and neglect: “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in paneled houses while *this* house remains a ruin?” See Haggai 1:2–1:4. The disturbances following Darius I’s accession to the throne posed further problems. With Babylonia and Egypt in open revolt, many Jews urged Zerubbabel, the new governor of Judah and a descendant of David, to establish himself as the ruler of an autonomous Jewish kingdom; see, for example, Haggai 2:20–2:23; Zechariah 6:13. The murmurs persisted even after Darius restored order to the empire in 520 BCE. Two years of chaos (522–520 BCE) and a thorough reshuffling of administrative personnel in the provinces had resulted in the loss of much information and many important documents. Persian officials unaware of Cyrus’ edict began to suspect that the true purpose of the ongoing reconstruction project, which involved the fortification of the Temple mount, was to build a citadel that could withstand a siege. Tattenai, the new sub-governor of Abarnahara, accordingly wrote to Darius recommending that a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon “to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem”; see Ezra 5:6–5:17.

- Darius ordered the search, but nothing was found. However, a memorandum of Cyrus' decree was located in Ecbatana, and on its strength, Darius issued a second proclamation, forbidding interference with the project; see Ezra 6:6–6:12. With royal authorization renewed, work on the Temple was successfully completed on March 12, 515 BCE; see Ezra 6:15; Olmstead (1948), 143.
- 49 We should emphasize that other “captive” nations must have felt the same exuberance as the Jews upon being “liberated” by Cyrus. For example, Eph'al (1988), 151, and Razmjou (2013), 118, cite documents from Syrian Neirab that demonstrate the repatriation of exiles to that region under Cyrus.
- 50 See Dandamaev (1989), 246.
- 51 The eminent classicist Eduard Meyer (1896) and (1912), 1, went so far as to describe Judaism as a product of the Persian age. According to Meyer, the institutionalization of the Jewish religion would never have occurred but for the economic prosperity of the Babylonian Jews and the support of the Achaemenid kings.
- 52 Olmstead (1948), 307.
- 53 See Nehemiah 5:14–5:17. Consider the Persian policy against the construction of city walls in subject countries; see Cawksell (2005), 34. Momigliano (1994), 25, compares the construction of Jerusalem's wall during the reign of Artaxerxes I to Themistocles' raising of defenses in Athens in the early fifth century BCE. Specifically, he classifies both initiatives as nationalistic reactions “to the cosmopolitan and tolerant despotism of the Persians.”
- 54 The one certain instance of overt Persian hostility toward the Jews occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes III, when, in the wake of major insurrections in Phoenicia and Egypt, the Jews revolted against the Persians. Artaxerxes retaliated by quashing the revolt and exiling several thousand Jews to Babylonia and Hyrcania. According to Parker (1978), Psalm 44 remembers this disaster.
- 55 See Hinnells (1974), 273.
- 56 See, for example, Mallowan (1985), 409; Briant (2002), 48–49.
- 57 See Hinnells (1974), 273; Bickerman (1988), 31.
- 58 See M. Smith (1963), 417. Also Appendix X.
- 59 See M. Smith (1963), 417–418.
- 60 The theory of Zoroastrian influence upon Judaism was widely accepted within the so-called “History of Religions” school of thought during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see Hinnells (1974), 271–276.
- 61 This notion is present in most arguments favoring Iranian religious influence; see, for example, Meyer (1896); Mills (1906b); G. Carter

- (1918), 39–40; von Gall (1926); Zaehner (1961), 20–21; Hinnells (1974), 273.
- 62 Yamauchi (1990), 458–466, provides a comprehensive summary of the literature both in favor of and against a significant Iranian influence on Judaism. One common objection to the theory of Iranian influence concerns the lack of certainty regarding the religion of the early Achaemenids, including Cyrus. However, Boyce (1988) has persuasively argued that the burden of proof must rest with those who contest the Achaemenids' Zoroastrianism, and we should remember that Zoroastrian influence could have penetrated the Jewish community absent Achaemenid support.
- 63 See Jaspers (1953) for the seminal study of the Axial Age.
- 64 See, for example, Bickerman (1967), 66: "The Persian education impressed on children the horror of lying, but in the official language disagreement with the official truth was the lie which makes the subjects rebellious. The Jews accepted this quietist ideology The whole conception of the priestly author who wrote the biblical Chronicles is conditioned by this idea. The union between the altar in Jerusalem and the throne in Susa seems to him to be natural and permanent."
- 65 See Meyer (1901), 167–172; Herzfeld (1947), 29–30; Toynbee (1962e), 33–34; Boadt (1984), 50, 433–434.
- 66 Hinnells (1974), 281.
- 67 See Barr (1985), 229–230.
- 68 See M. Smith (1963), 418; Barr (1968–1969); Boyce (1982), 45.
- 69 M. Smith (1963), 418. Ackroyd (1970), 130, makes a similar observation.
- 70 M. Smith (1963), 418.
- 71 It is true that Second Isaiah remarks that his audience should have heard about this doctrine "from the beginning"; see Isaiah 40:21, 40:28, 44:8. However, as Morton Smith (1963), 418, observes, "[religious] innovators often claim antiquity for their innovations."
- 72 See Genesis 3:8.
- 73 See Genesis 11:5–11:7. Consider also Genesis 32:24–30, in which Yahweh wrestles with Jacob and loses.
- 74 See Isaiah 27:1; Psalm 74:14, 89:10, 104:26; Job 26:12, 41:1–8. In some of these passages, Leviathan is called Rahab.
- 75 Specifically, the myth recalls the combat between the Canaanite deities Baal and Anat against the seven-headed serpent Lotan, whose name is cognate with Leviathan's. It also parallels Marduk's killing of Tiamat, from whose remains Marduk was believed to have created the heavens and the earth. There is extensive literature on these early creation stories; see, for example, Vriezen

- (1967), 165–166; Boadt (1984), 221–222; Day (1985) and (2002), 98–105; Graham (2005); Armstrong (2006), 49. Some scholars have disputed whether the biblical references to Leviathan truly imply a creation myth; see, for example, Heidel (1951), 102–114. However, Day (1985) and (2002), 98–105, has convincingly argued against this position.
- 76 Thus, in the Assyrian version of the myth, Ashur, and not Marduk, slays Tiamat; see Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 186–187. For the biblical parallel, compare Psalm 82 to the Babylonian creation epic, which places heavy emphasis upon Marduk's election to the head of the pantheon. In Psalm 82, Yahweh chastises the other gods of the heavenly assembly (presumably the deities of neighboring countries) for failing to uphold justice. See also Psalm 95, which hails Yahweh as the “great God, the great King above all gods.”
- 77 Isaiah 45:5.
- 78 Armstrong (2006), 255–256. For foreign deities vanquishing Yahweh, see 2 Kings 3:18–3:19, 3:26–3:27.
- 79 See Boyce (1982), 46.
- 80 *Yasna* 44.3.1–44.3.2, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 81 Isaiah 45:8, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 82 *Yasna* 44.4.1–44.4.3, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 83 Isaiah 45:18, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 84 *Yasna* 44.4.5, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 85 Isaiah 45:19, as translated in M. Smith (1963), 419.
- 86 See, for example, Barr (1968–1969); Boadt (1984), 399.
- 87 See Heidel (1951), 127–129.
- 88 Boyce (1982), 192, and (1984b), 300.
- 89 Genesis 1:1–1:2
- 90 Kapelrud (1979), 165–166. Boyce (1982), 192, and (1984a), 300, characterizes the creative function of the Spirit of God in Genesis I as a new role. By contrast, Morton Smith, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Bible, ii. Persian Elements in the Bible,” argues that this function appears in the earliest strata of the Old Testament, for which reason any resemblance between the Spirit of God and Spenta Mainyu must be coincidental.
- 91 *Yasna* 44.7, as translated by Boyce (1984a), 282–283.
- 92 See Barr (1985), 208.
- 93 This is apparent from the distinction between the preamble of Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscription b, and that of other Old Persian royal inscriptions. The standard preamble runs: “A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created that sky, who created man, who created happiness for man . . .” Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscription b states: “A great god is Ahuramazda,

who created this wonderful work that is seen, who created happiness for man” As the reference to the “wonderful work” replaces the creation of the earth, the sky, and man, we may infer that it alludes to those very acts; see Lincoln (2007), 62–65.

94 Darius I, Susa, Inscription f. The term *frasha* also appears in the following Old Persian inscriptions: Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscription b, and Susa, Inscriptions a, j, o, and s.

95 As an alternative to *frasha*, Darius could have used the approximately synonymous word *frathara*, which lacks the religious connotation; see Kent (1953), 198; Xerxes I, Persepolis, Inscription f.

96 Genesis 1:3–1:31. Yet another detail of the new Jewish cosmogony that may suggest Iranian influence concerns the conspicuous absence of angels in the revised creation myth. Angels comprised part of the Jewish cosmos since the earliest times, but they are never enumerated among God’s creations in Genesis I. According to Barr (1985), 207–208, this omission may be explained in terms of a Jewish reaction against a prominent feature of the Zoroastrian cosmogony, in which Ahuramazda works through Spenta Mainyu to create the six other Amesha Spentas, each of whom is associated with a specific stage of creation. Of course, any Jewish rejection of the Zoroastrian idea that the Amesha Spentas had a role in the creation may betray a measure of indebtedness to other aspects of the Zoroastrian cosmogony, as people generally do not reject doctrines or elements of doctrines that are entirely irrelevant to them. For example, the Islamic rejection of the holy trinity and the Christian belief that Jesus was the son of God became a focal point of Moslem theology only because Islam accepted other elements of Christianity, such as Jesus’ prophetic mission and Mary’s virginity. Viewed from this perspective, Barr’s observation, if true, could support the notion of a more general Zoroastrian stimulus behind Genesis I. On the other hand, Boyce (1982), 192, may be overstating things when she asserts that the biblical notion of a seven-stage creation emanated entirely from Iran. The number seven was sacred to many ancient cultures, for it represented the number of heavenly bodies visible to the naked eye, and the Babylonian creation epic also appears to proceed in seven stages, although these stages are neither as clear nor as tightly schematized as in Zoroastrianism or Genesis; see Heidel (1951), 129; Barr (1985), 207.

97 See, for example, Mills (1906b), 276–277, 436–437; G. Carter (1918), 67–68; Battenwieser (1922), 32; Hinnells (1974), 276–277; Boyce (1982), 195; Yamauchi (1990), 459–460. Note the evolution of Satan’s character from Job 1:7, 2:2, to Zechariah 3:2, and thence

to 1 Chronicles 21:1 and the New Testament.

98 Some scholars have argued that an ethical dualism existed at the core of the ancient Babylonian religion and that this philosophy had a significant impact upon other Near Eastern cultures. However, the dualism intrinsic to Mesopotamian religion was fundamentally cosmological rather than ethical; see Green (1992), 32. And evil spirits, such as those deemed responsible for plague, were just as often propitiated as they were opposed.

99 A fundamental point of variance exists in the evolution of the Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian notions of the devil. In the former tradition, the opposition between God and Satan is greatly unbalanced, inasmuch God creates Satan and is at all times more powerful than him; by contrast, Zoroastrians came to view Ahuramazda and Angra Mainyu as coeval rivals of roughly commensurate power. Some scholars have cited this distinction between the Iranian and Jewish conceptions of Satan as a basis for downplaying or even dismissing the role of Iranian influence in the evolution of Jewish dualism. However, the objection may be undue, for the original Zoroastrian doctrine of Angra Mainyu may have differed considerably from its later manifestation. Specifically, Zoroaster seems to have taught that Angra Mainyu was not coeternal with the Wise Lord, but rather a creation of Ahuramazda who chose the path of the Lie. Angra Mainyu thus originally opposes his own twin, Spenta Mainyu, initially conceived of as both a creation and an emanation of Ahuramazda. In later Zoroastrianism, Ahuramazda was completely merged with Spenta Mainyu, and this development may have contributed to the belief that Angra Mainyu was Ahuramazda's evil counterpart. When exactly this development occurred is unclear, but the persistence of the original doctrine during the early Achaemenid period is suggested by the remarkable similarity between the so-called "Gatha of the Choice" (*Yasna* 30) in which Zoroaster describes the opposition between Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, and the early second century BCE Jewish *Manual of Discipline* from Qumran. The Gatha states:

Now at the beginning the twin spirits have declared their nature, the better and the evil, in thought word and deed. And between the two, the wise ones choose well, not so the foolish. And when these two spirits came together, in the beginning they established life and non-life, and that at the last the Worst Existence should be for the wicked, but for the righteous one the Best of Mind. Of these two spirits, the evil one chose to do the worst things, but the Most Holy Spirit, clothed in the most steadfast heavens, joined himself unto Righteousness; and thus did all those who delight to please the

Wise Lord by honest deeds. Between the two, the false gods also did not choose rightly, for while they pondered they were beset by error, so that they chose the Worst Mind. Then did they hasten to join themselves unto Fury that, that they might by it deprave the existence of man.

Similarly, the *Manual of Discipline* (3.15–4.19) provides:

By the God of Knowledge is everything wrought He created man to rule this world, appointing for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of His visitation – the spirits of truth and deceit. The origin of truth is in a fountain of light, that of deceit in a well of darkness. The command over the sons of deceit is in the hand of the angel of darkness, and in the ways of darkness they walk. The error of the sons righteousness derives from the angel of darkness, and all their sins, their offenses, and their iniquitous deeds are caused by his rule, in accordance with God’s mysteries, until its appointed end. All their afflictions and moments of tribulation are caused by his malevolent dominion He [that is, God] created the spirits of light and darkness, and upon them he founded every work and every action . . . the one God loves for all eternity, and delights in all its doings forever; the other – its assembly He loathes, and all its ways He hates forever But God in his mysterious wisdom appointed a term for the existence of deceit, and at the time fixed for visitation he will destroy it forever

See Winston (1966), 200–201, for the translations of the Gatha and the Dead Sea Scroll cited in this note. Not only are the two passages virtually identical in substance, but also the appellation “God of Knowledge” represents a direct translation of Ahuramazda’s name. Additional evidence supporting a syncretic identification of Satan with Angra Mainyu exists in the New Testament. The synoptic Gospels each provide that Satan tempted Christ in the wilderness, with Luke (4:5–4:8) and Matthew (4:8–4:9) stating that the third and final temptation entailed an offer of dominion over “all the kingdoms of the world.” According to the *Videvdatta* (19.6), Zoroaster was once alone by the banks of a river, when Angra Mainyu tried unsuccessfully to tempt him to “renounce the Good Religion of the worshippers of Mazda” by promising him dominion over the whole earth. For an analysis of these passages, see Jackson (1926), 51–53.

¹⁰⁰ See G. Carter (1918), 68.

¹⁰¹ See *Yasht* 19.96; *Bundahishn* 1.27, 3.2, 30.29. Much has been made of the references, in Talmudic literature and the Book of Tobit, to one such arch-demon, Asmodeus, whose name some scholars have derived from Avestan Aeshma Daeva, or the “Demon Aeshma”; see Shaked (1984), 318; Russell (2001). Aeshma features

prominently in the Gathas as the personification of vengeful wrath, but aside from possibly his name, he has little in common with the Jewish Asmodeus. Barr (1985), 215–216, suggests that Asmodeus' name may derive from the Semitic root *sh-m-d*, meaning “destroy,” and have nothing to do with the Iranian demon. Additional parallels with Iranian religion have been sought between the Jewish concept of fallen angels and the Zoroastrian belief that Angra Mainyu and the Daivas chose the path of the Lie; see Barr (1985), 228; Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 179. M. Smith (1963), 420, has speculated that Second Isaiah's “violent opposition to false gods” may have been inspired by Zoroastrian teachings, in which the Daivas were equated with demons.

102 See G. Carter (1918), 47–48. The early Jews were monists, who attributed both good and evil to Yahweh; see Amos 3:6; 1 Kings 22:19–22:23.

103 See Russell (2001).

104 Yahweh's evolution into an omnipresent and omniscient deity is apparent from epithets by which he was commonly known during the post-Exilic period: “God of Heaven” and “God of Knowledge.” Both designations appear among Ahuramazda's titles in Zoroastrianism, and it is interesting that in the Iranian religion, as well as in later Judaism, the concepts “God” and “Heaven” were practically synonymous. Parallel developments occurred among the pagan religions of Achaemenid Mesopotamia. Thus, the hitherto secondary sky god Anu ascended to the head of the local pantheon in Babylonian Uruk, while “Baal of Heaven” attained similar prominence among the Aramaic-speaking tribes of western Mesopotamia. Kuhrt (1987), 151, suggests that the cults of these divinities benefited from their identification “in some way with an Iranian sky/creator god (Ahuramazda).”

105 Boyce (1982), 195.

106 The oldest strata of the Old Testament show Yahweh to have been surrounded by angels and spirits, which served as the divine messengers and officers of Yahweh's heavenly court, but these entities played only a minor role in the early prophetic literature. The argument has been made that the pre-Exilic Jewish concept of angels evolved from the messenger deities of the Semitic pantheon, as well as the Semitic belief in a divine council headed by the chief god of the pantheon; see Grabbe (2006), 364.

107 See 1 Enoch 18:6–18:8; 20:1–20:8; 24:2–25:3; Tobit 12:15; Revelations 8:2; Daniel 10:13. The very uncertainty as to whether the arch-angels numbered six or seven may be indicative of Zoroastrian influence, as a similar ambiguity existed in the Iranian religion pertaining to the number of Amesha Spentas. The

Babylonians and Assyrians also believed in a group of seven beneficent divinities, but these deities played a rather inconspicuous role in the Mesopotamian pantheon; see Black and Green (1992), 162–163. The overall lack of correspondence between the names and characteristics of the Jewish arch-angels and those of the Amesha Spentas hardly debunks the argument for Persian influence, because the argument supposes “that the Jews took general conceptions from the Persians and molded them in accordance with their own habits of mind”; G. Carter (1918), 65. A more explicit connection to the Amesha Spentas may exist in post-Exilic Judaism’s personification of Yahweh’s attributes. There appears to be a connection between Spenta Mainyu and the Spirit of God in Genesis I. Other texts mention an abstract entity called the “Wisdom of God,” which counsels Yahweh and befriends mankind. According to some scholars, an association between this spirit and the Amesha Spentas Vohu Manah (Good Mind) and Spenta Armaiti (Holy Devotion) is likely (the link to the latter arising from the fact that both Spenta Armaiti and the Wisdom of God are described as female); see G. Carter (1918), 48–49, 66; Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 179. Mills (1906) has claimed Zoroastrian inspiration for the teachings of Philo of Alexandria, an important Jewish philosopher of the Hellenistic era who stated that God communicates with man through the Holy Spirit and six other divine intermediaries, or “powers.” Other aspects of post-Exilic Judeo-Christian angelology have also been traced to Iran. The idea that each person has a guardian angel or angelic double has been linked to the Iranian belief in *fravashis*. For the Iranians, these supernatural beings represented the component of one’s soul that pre-exists birth; the *fravashis* of deceased righteous men were even believed to keep watch over their descendants and homeland. According to some scholars, the characterization of the *fravashis* as territorial spirits underlies the late Jewish belief, represented in the Book of Daniel, that each nation had its own guardian angels.

108 On the sudden transformation of Sheol (the Jewish netherworld), see Zaehner (1961), 57–58. Boyce (1982), 193, cites Porteous’ statement that: “One of the most astonishing things about Israel’s [pre-Exilic] religious faith is the warmth and intensity of fellowship with God which was experienced against the somber background of a belief in nothing but the most shadowy and unsatisfactory kind of existence after death.”

109 Mills (1906b), 430. Thus, early prophets, such as Enoch and Elijah, were said to have escaped death, but their stories do not demonstrate conviction in the hereafter. The same is true of Saul and other characters whose ghosts were temporarily revived

through witchcraft. According to Mills (1906b), 431, “the life of the departed soul before the Exile was very like the classic Hades, ‘the land where all things are forgotten.’”

110 See Mills (1906b), 430–436; Hinnells (1974), 277; Boyce (1982), 193. Shaked (1984), 323, suggests that the Jews even adopted the Zoroastrian belief that the deceased’s soul remains beside the body for three days after death.

111 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 73, 76; Xerxes I, Persepolis, Inscription h § 4d.

112 See Plutarch *Of Isis and Osiris* 46–47; Eliade (1965), 125; Herzfeld (1947), 2–3. Boyce (1975), 286, speculates that the original Zoroastrian scheme may have entailed a 6,000-year cycle, and Kingsley (1995), 191–192, argues that the Achaemenids believed in a 6,000-year world period. This seems unlikely to me. The ancient Iranians had a marked fascination with the number three, as evidenced by their tripartite divisions of society (warriors, priests, farmers), ethics (good thoughts, good words, good deeds), and the cosmos (earth, atmosphere, heaven). This fascination should have led them to attribute special significance to a millennial scheme consisting of nine (three times three) millennia. In any event, the debate concerning the length of the millenary scheme followed by the Achaemenids is immaterial, for, in all attested schemes, events on earth occur only during the last 6,000 years; see Boyce (1975), 286. For explanations of the later schemes of 7,000 and 12,000 years (based on the planets and signs of the zodiac, respectively), see Zaehner (1955), 96–100. The 12,000-year scheme is referenced in 4 Ezra (also known as 2 Esdras) 14.10–14.12, a Jewish text of the first century CE; see M. West (2007), 7.

113 Despite some uncertainty as to whether Zoroaster himself preached the doctrine of a general resurrection, such a doctrine was accepted by Zoroastrians of the Achaemenid period, as evident from the writings of the classical authors; see de Jong (1997), 327, with references to the sources.

114 See Mehta (1985), 101. The concept of Khshathra Vairya is hypostasized as one of the Amesha Spentas (see page 128).

115 Ezekiel 34–37.

116 See Toynbee (1962e), 120.

117 See Russell (2001), 5.

118 See Russell (2001), 5.

One King of Many, One Lord of Many: The Royal Ideology and Administration of the Persian Empire

1 Strabo 11.8.4; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.20.

- 2 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.21, translated by Miller.
- 3 See Tavernier (2007), 143, for the translation of Old Persian *vispazananam* as “all kinds of races”. For the population estimate, see Llewellyn-Jones (2013), 76.
- 4 See Herodotus 3.89.
- 5 See Vogelsang (1992), 178–179, 242, 312; Briant (2002), 743–754, 762–768.
- 6 T. C. Young (1988a), 41–42; Briant (2013), 6–9.
- 7 The referenced study was conducted by Eisenstadt (1963) and analyzes the Sasanid, Byzantine, Tang, and Spanish-American Empires. My inspiration for mentioning this study derives from Fried (2004), 4–5, who does so to stage her thesis regarding relations between the Persian king and high priest of Jerusalem during the Achaemenid period.
- 8 Cook (1983), 76, citing Schaefer.
- 9 Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.12. Corroboration for Arrian’s testimony rests in the Cyrus Cylinder, which thrice mentions Cyrus’ subjects prostrating before him: (1) “he [Marduk] made the land of Gutium and all the Umman Manda bow in submission at his [Cyrus’] feet”; (2) “all the people of Tintir [Babylon], all the land of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors, bowed to him [Cyrus] and kissed his feet”; and (3) “by his [Marduk’s] exalted word, all the kings who sit upon thrones throughout the world, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, who live in the districts far-off, the kings of the West, who dwell in tents, all of them brought their heavy tribute before me, and in Babylon they kissed my feet.”
- 10 Herodotus (7.136) states that Xerxes’ guards once resorted to shoving the heads of two obstinate Spartan ambassadors to the ground before an otherwise cordial audience. Some Greeks even resorted to ruse, to give the impression that they were performing *proskynesis*, when, in fact, they were not. According to Aelian (*Historical Miscellany* 1.31), the Greek Ismenias purposefully dropped his ring at his feet and quickly bowed down to pick it up, thus making it seem as if he was stooping before the Persian king.
- 11 See Medvedskaya (2002a); Diakonoff (1985b), 142–145; Dandamaev (1989), 95–102.
- 12 Thus, Xenophon declares that, after conquering Babylon, “Cyrus conceived a desire to establish himself as he thought became a king”; see Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.37, translated by Miller.
- 13 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.14.
- 14 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.14, translated by Miller.
- 15 See Esther 4:11. That this law existed under Cyrus may be deduced from Herodotus 3.72, 3.84, 3.118.

- 16 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.14.
- 17 Herodotus 7.57, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 18 See, for example, Herodotus 9.109.
- 19 Cook (1983), 132.
- 20 As translated by Miller, Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.40–8.1.47) states that “Cyrus . . . held the belief that a ruler ought to excel his subjects not only in point of being actually better than they, but that he ought also to cast a sort of spell upon them.”
- 21 Hodgson (1977), 280–284, provides a particularly cogent description of the virtues of royal absolutism.
- 22 Herodotus 3.82, translated by Grene.
- 23 See Stronach (1997a), 45; Root (1979), 309–311.
- 24 Medvedskaya (2002a) draws the parallel to the actions of Darius, who, in her opinion, was also raised to power by tribal aristocrats.
- 25 For Median elements in Persian royal and bureaucratic titles, see Wiesehofer (2001), 29; Harmatta (1971a), 10–14. For the argument that these elements cannot be taken as evidence of bureaucratic structuring by the Medes, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1988), 208–210.
- 26 In addition to the basic term *khshayathiya*, or “king,” the Median components in these titles are as follows: (1) regarding the adjective *vazraka*, “great,” the presence of *z*, rather than Old Persian *d*, betrays Median origin; (2) with respect to the term *vispazananam*, “of all kinds of men,” the element *vispa*, “all,” reflects the Median cognate of Old Persian *visa*, and *zananam*, the genitive case of “men,” represents the Median form of Old Persian **dananam*. The word *dahyunam*, “of the lands,” would have been rendered identically in Median and Old Persian.
- 27 See Harmatta (1971a), 11. Harmatta’s paper should be treated with caution, since its author generally does not account for possible changes in Persian royal titulary during the Achaemenid period. Herzfeld (1968), 169–170, surmises that the titulary employed by Darius in his Bisutun Inscription, the earliest text commissioned by this king, contains the titles borne by the first two Achaemenid emperors: “Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of the Lands.” Cyrus carries the title “King of the Lands” in several Akkadian texts, and the inscriptions attributed to him at Pasargadae varyingly style him as “King” and “Great King.”
- 28 See Harmatta (1971a), 11, and (1971b), 221.
- 29 See Frye (1984), 106, footnote 69; Wiesehofer (2001), 29. As Harmatta (1971b), 225, points out, the title “King of Kings” was seldom used among Mesopotamian rulers of the first millennium BCE.

- 30 See Wiesehofer (2001), 29, 56–57.
- 31 Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 1.33.
- 32 For brief yet comprehensive discussions of this concept, see Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Farr(ah), Xwarenah”; Zaehner (1961), 150–153. According to Lubotsky (2002), the sedentary Iranians adopted the concept of the *Farnah* from the Scythians.
- 33 See Soudavar (2010), 128–133; Shahbazi (2005), 103; Medvedskaya (2002a); Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Farr(ah), Xwarenah.”
- 34 See Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Farr(ah), Xwarenah.” Also *Yasht* 14.19; *Yasht* 19.35–19.36, 19.82.
- 35 The basic theme of the gods favoring the Persian king on account of his piety and good character and their support of his earthly endeavors appears in the Cyrus Cylinder, the compositions of Second Isaiah, and other texts datable to Cyrus’ reign. These texts do not mention Ahuramazda, because they were written for specific non-Iranian minorities (the Babylonians and the Jews).
- 36 Mallowan (1985), 416, suggests that “Cyrus’ new concept of mercy and justice may have emanated from [Zoroastrian] beliefs.”
- 37 See Cogan (1974) and (1993); Holloway (2002), 217–425.
- 38 See Cogan (1974), 42–61, and (1993); Holloway (2002), 80–216.
- 39 Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1.
- 40 For the most recent and thorough treatments of this topic, see Lincoln (2007).
- 41 Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.9.11–1.9.12, translated by Warner.

- 42 Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 32, 33.
- 43 Herodotus 3.15.
- 44 See, for example, Herodotus 6.41, on Darius' merciful treatment of Miltiades' son, Metiochus, despite his father's treachery; 7.181, on how Xerxes' Persian marines rushed to treat the wounds of a valorous Greek combatant; and, most emphatically, 7.238, where Herodotus states that "the Persians, more than any other nation I know of, honor men who distinguish themselves in war."
- 45 Esther 5:3, 5:6, 7:2, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.
- 46 See Herodotus 9.110. Herodotus gives the Persian name of this holiday as *tykta*, which probably reflects Old Persian **tukhta* ("to reimburse"); see Tavernier (2007), 608. It was the only day of the year on which the Achaemenid king anointed his head and gave gifts to the Persians; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 9.464a.
- 47 This bit of information derives from the Hellenistic historian Agathocles; see Cawkwell (2005), 43–44, endnote 16. Cyrus' treatment of Pytharchus recalls the better known example of the Athenian Themistocles, the vanquisher of the Persian navy at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE, who, after being ostracized from Athens approximately fifteen years later, sought refuge in the court of Artaxerxes I. Artaxerxes granted Themistocles several estates in Asia Minor from which he could draw the finest fish, salt, and wheat for his succor.
- 48 Consider Xerxes' treatment of the descendants of Boges, the Persian commander of Thracian Eion, who perished while defending his stronghold; see Herodotus 7.107.
- 49 Quoted from Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 7.
- 50 Isaiah 44:28; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.2.14.
- 51 On the continuation of this office under the Sasanids, see Shayegan, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Hazārbed." Relying upon much earlier sources, the fifth century CE Greek grammarian Hesychius of Alexandria describes the *Hazarapati* as an "usher" or "announcer," thus implying that this office combined military and civil functions already during Achaemenid times. In both Hellenistic and Sasanid times, the *Hazarbed* served as the king's grand vizier.
- 52 Sekunda (1983), 70–72, equates the offices of Royal Spear-Bearer and *Hazarapati* on the basis that the members of the Royal Bodyguard were often described simply as "Spear-bearers" (Greek *doryphoroi*). Per this identification, the switch in costume from Persian to Median attire, as evident from the Persepolis reliefs, may be explained by the *Hazarapati* also becoming the chief usher of the

court sometime after Darius attained power.

- 53 There is some controversy regarding Aspathines' title, although most scholars agree that he served as Darius' Royal Bow-Bearer. The source of the controversy is the brief inscription on the façade of Darius' tomb. The Old Persian version of this text reads: "Aspathines, the *vassa*-bearer, holds King Darius' *isuva*." Because Aspathines is depicted with both bow-case and battle-ax, the question is whether either of the Old Persian terms *vassa* or *isuva* denotes any of these items. Kent (1953), 174, 206, defines *vassa* as "bow" and *isuva* as "ax." But more recent studies focusing on the Elamite version of the brief inscription seem to conclusively demonstrate that *isuva* meant "bow-case," whereas *vassa* meant something like "garment" or, more appropriately, "armor" (the relief shows Aspathines carrying a bag full of equipment, of which only the bow-case is visible); see Henkelman (2003b), 118–129; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Aspačanā." In any event, there can be no doubt that Aspathines was both "Armor-Bearer" and "Bow-Bearer," and the fact that the inscription does not seem to expressly mention the latter title is easily explainable on the ground that following "Armor-Bearer" with another title containing the same suffix "would have had a rather clumsy effect"; Henkelman (2003b), 119. That said, Aspathines' dual role as Royal Armor-Bearer and Royal Bow-Bearer is certainly unusual and may reflect a consolidation of titles following the liquidation of the treasonous Vindafarnah, who appears as Darius' Royal Bow-Bearer at Bisutun; see Hinz (2008–2009), 154.
- 54 For Aspathines' role as an administrator, see Hallock (1969), 670; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Aspačanā."
- 55 One cannot help but recall the founder legends of Ctesias and Dinon, which allude to Cyrus serving Astyages as a cup-bearer, torch-bearer, and the like.
- 56 See Briant (2002), 82, 311; Henkelman (2010), 120–122.
- 57 Esther 1:13–1:14, as translated in the Douay-Rheims Bible. Other translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, use, perhaps more appropriately, the term "officials" to describe these seven viziers. The existence of this council at the time of Alexander may be alluded to by Arrian (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.7.3).
- 58 See Herodotus 1.154, 3.120.
- 59 Herodotus 3.120.
- 60 See Justin 1.6.16; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 8. In the Bisutun Inscription (§ 35), Darius describes his father Hystaspes as having held an important command in Parthia and Hyrcania. Darius does not expressly call Hystaspes a satrap, but this has been inferred by a number of scholars; see Olmstead (1948), 45–46;

- Burn (1962), 59; Herzfeld (1968), 318. Perhaps, Darius did not want to demean his father by referring to him as a subordinate.
- 61 See Herodotus 3.97. Some scholars have speculated that this exemption applied only to the three core tribes of Pasargadae, Maspians, and Maraphians, or to those tribes that remained loyal to Darius in 522–521 BCE.
- 62 On the authority of Herodotus (1.209–1.210, 3.70), one might conjecture that the Achaemenid prince Hystaspes looked after this province on behalf of Cyrus before his appointment as the chief military commander or satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania.
- 63 Ctesias mentions a Persian satrap of Cappadocia in connection with events that transpired during the first decade of Darius' reign; see Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 20. Toynbee (1963a), 671–675, argues that Cyrus and Cambyses included Cappadocia and Armenia within the same administrative unit but that Darius later detached Cappadocia from the Armenian province and appended it to the satrapy of Dascylium. Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies,” takes the more sensible view that Cappadocia was always its own satrapy.
- 64 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.11. Also Appendix XIII.
- 65 See Cook (1983), 83. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets also mention a satrap in Carmania, but as Henkelman (2010) has shown, the officer in question, whose name appears in Elamite form as Karkish, was also the satrap of Gedrosia (Elamite *Purrush*). The inference is that Carmania and Gedrosia formed part of the same administrative unit when the relevant texts were inscribed and that the ancient scribes varyingly referred to this province as the satrapy of Carmania or Gedrosia. The situation may have differed under Cyrus, who, according to some scholars, included Carmania within the satrapy of Parsa; see Herzfeld (1968), 289, 298–299; Toynbee (1963a), 583, 602–603, 622–623, 637–641. However, Ctesias (*Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 8), understood Cyrus to have linked Carmania to the satrapies of the east.
- 66 See Briant (2002), 65.
- 67 See Henkelman (2010), 704–713.
- 68 The quotation is from Henkelman (2010), 712.
- 69 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.10, translated by Miller.
- 70 See Vogelsang (1992), 199. At the Battle of Gaugamela, the satrap of Bactria mustered several thousands of men including Persians, Bactrians, Sogdians, Gandarans, and a large contingent of Saka horsemen led by the nomadic king Mauaces. The same engagement saw the Arachosian satrap arrive with numerous troops from his own satrapy, Sattagyidian mountaineers “who lived by the sword,”

and war-elephants sent by an Indian king from beyond the Indus. These levies demonstrate the satrap's far-reaching authority.

71 Herodotus 3.89.

72 Cameron (1948), 1–4; Cook (1983), 81, 86. Jursa (2011), 433–434, observes that the Persian administration was from the outset very much “in tune with the trend towards an increasing monetisation of economic exchange,” for which reason it “accepted, or perhaps indeed encouraged, payments in silver rather than in kind.” However, Jursa goes on to state that Babylonian records from Darius’ reign do not attest to significant payments of cash to the royal treasury. Darius must therefore have finalized his fiscal reforms relatively late in his reign – in 493 BCE according to Cook (1983), 81 – and the reforms themselves probably took several years to implement.

73 See Briant (2002), 393–394. Also Plutarch *The Remarkable Sayings of Kings and Commanders* 172f, translated by Hinton; Polyaeus 7.11.3.

74 Cook (1983), 82–83.

75 See Jursa (2011). Urban households also had to provision royal dependents and soldiers.

76 See Henkelman and Kleber (2007); Henkelman (2008b).

77 See Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Barda and Barda-Dāri, i. Achaemenid Period.”

78 See Briant (2002), 344.

79 See Frye (1963), 97.

80 Gabriel (2002), 128, notes that Sennacherib headed this agency during the reign of Sargon II.

81 See Harmatta (1971), 12; Balcer (1977). Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 8.6.16) mentions the King’s Eye performing an annual inspection of the satrapies with an army.

82 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.9; *Oeconomicus* 4.5–4.11. Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 101–102, suggest that this division of military and civil authority represented a temporary measure introduced during the reign of Darius I, not Cyrus, and that it had been done away with by Xenophon’s time, thus paving the way for the numerous satrapal revolts of the fourth century BCE. But Hignett (1963), 82, correctly dates the division of authority to Cyrus’ reign.

83 See Hallock (1970), 54–55; Cameron (1973), 50–52; Gershevitch (1979a), 116.

84 Esther 3.12, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version. Frye (1963), 99, highlights this passage.

85 Texts inscribed in Old Persian, Aramaic, Phrygian, and Greek have also been found among the Persepolis archives. The Old Persian

- find is significant because it dispels the prior notion that the Old Persian script was used only for writing monumental inscriptions.
- 86 Persepolis Fortification Tablet 1797, as translated by Hallock (1969), 490.
- 87 Henkelman and Kleber (2007).
- 88 See Briant (2002), 96.
- 89 Cameron (1973), 51, and Gershevitch (1979a) argue that the scribes were Elamites trained to write in this manner. By contrast, Henkelman (2008a), 86-88, 348-350, and (2011a), 586-595, argues, based on their names and other information, that the Persepolis scribes were mostly Persian speakers who had become literate in Elamite, the traditional language for written communication in southwestern Iran. According to Basello (2006), 28, the Persian names of the Persepolis scribes are not reliable indicators of their ethnicity as the Elamites customarily used alternate names when dealing with foreigners.
- 90 Ezra 6:2.
- 91 Note that Persepolis style tablets have been found in Elam, Arachosia, and Armenia; see Briant (2002), 764.
- 92 Herodotus 3.89.
- 93 Herodotus 4.166.
- 94 Album, Bates, and Floor, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Coins and Coinage"; Georges (2000), 8-9. The relative value of gold to silver was thirteen to one.
- 95 See Mallowan (1985), 415. The first royal mint in the Persian Empire was in Sardis; see Album, Bates, and Floor, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Coins and Coinage."
- 96 Mallowan (1985), 415.
- 97 Chua (2007), 8.
- 98 Cook (1985), 223.
- 99 See Dyck (1996), 107-108, and (1998), 123-124; T. C. Young (1988a), 41-43, and (1988b), 103-105; Toynbee (1974); Ben-Gurion (1974), 134.
- 100 See Appendix V.
- 101 See Kuhrt (1988), 126-127; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 360.
- 102 See Jursa (2007).
- 103 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 362-363; Fried (2004), 44-46.
- 104 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 362-365, on the general Achaemenid policy of honoring temples yet weakening their position vis-à-vis the monarchy.
- 105 See Oates (1986), 133.

- 106 See Plato *Letters* 7.332B; Diodorus Siculus 1.95.4–5, where Darius is remembered as Egypt's last great lawgiver; Olmstead (1948), 119–136, 142.
- 107 Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 122.
- 108 See Holtz (2010). The first known Iranian judge in Babylonia was a certain Bagaina, mentioned in documents from 516 BCE; see Dandamaev (1992), 54.
- 109 Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 122.
- 110 Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 122–123. Olmstead (1948), 120–121, maintains that the Hammurabi Code served as the basis for Darius' lost Ordinance of Good Regulations. The suspicion of Fried (2005), 35, that Persian judges in Babylonia applied only Persian law cannot be taken seriously because the extant documents deal mainly with commercial transactions, for which little precedent existed in Iran.
- 111 Herodotus 3.19.
- 112 See Toynbee (1962d), 123, footnote 2.
- 113 Jones (1937), 234–235, provides that Gaza and Ashdod were the only coastal cities in Palestine that the Achaemenids did not bequeath to the Phoenicians.
- 114 See Diodorus Siculus 16.41.
- 115 See Barnett (1969), 420.
- 116 See Justin 19.1.10–19.1.13, regarding Darius I's condemnation of the practice among the Carthaginians.
- 117 See Herodotus 3.7–3.9; Toynbee (1963a), 658–659; S. Smith (1944), 44. Eph'al (1982), 203, argues that Cambyses and not Cyrus entered into this arrangement with the Arabs.
- 118 See Hodgson (1974), 153, 198–199, for the role that the Lakhmid and Ghassanid Bedouins played in protecting the Arabian borders of the Sasanid and Byzantine Empires, respectively. The dissolution of these alliances paved the path for the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia and the Levant.
- 119 Vogelsang (1992), 314–315. Vogelsang's theory is not necessarily inconsonant with the recently analyzed Aramaic texts of the Khalili Collection, which show the satrapal administration in Bactria and Sogdiana performing tasks typical of the provincial government in other parts of the empire, for even Vogelsang admits that Persian rule was more centralized in the vicinity of key urban settlements.
- 120 Vogelsang (1992), 243–244.
- 121 See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.7.3.
- 122 See Herzfeld (1947), 123–126, 202–204.
- 123 The reason for this resistance was that, unlike Cyrus and Cambyses, Darius lacked Median affiliations, and this apparently

led a number of Median nobles to believe that their condition would worsen with Darius' seizure of power; see Toynbee (1963a), 599–602; Vogelsang (1998). Such apprehensions proved to be self-fulfilling. After defeating not one but two attempts to resurrect the Deiocid dynasty, Darius had no qualms about demonstrating that the Medes were no more than junior partners of the Persians in the grand scheme of the Achaemenid Empire. See also Appendix XIII regarding the impact that Darius' administrative reforms had on the Medes.

124 See Kuhrt (1988), 134–135.

125 See Garsoian (1997), 40, 44; Russell (1997), 27.

126 See Toumanoff (1963), 69, footnote 71; Kurkjian (2008), 49. Consider also that the Armenian upstart Arkha, mentioned in the Bisutun Inscription, may have been a vassal king (see endnote 20 on page 567).

127 See Vogelsang (1992), 111, 138, 173–179; Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies.”

128 The tradition preserved by Diodorus Siculus (31.19.12) that Cyrus gave his aunt Atossa in marriage to a Cappadocian vassal king named Pharnaces seems apocryphal.

129 See T. C. Young (1988a), 35.

130 This assumes that the fabulously wealthy Pythius the Lydian, who entertained Xerxes' army in 481 BCE, was a descendant of Croesus; see S. Lewis (1999); Briant (2002), 401. On the continuation of local traditions in Achaemenid Lydia, see Dusinberre (2003), 126–127.

131 See Cawkwell (2005), 39.

132 See Cawkwell (2005), 37.

133 See Cawkwell (2005), 83, endnote 43.

134 See Herodotus 6.43.

135 See Cawkwell (2005), 35; Briant (2002), 70, 383. According to Herodotus (6.42), Darius' tax reforms resulted in the Asiatic Greeks paying less taxes from 493 BCE onward than they had during earlier periods. Given that Darius' tax quotas were fixed until the fall of the empire, the annual tax imposed upon the Asiatic Greeks was less under the Persians than it had been under the Lydians. Polyaeus (7.11.3) also characterizes Darius' tax quota as relatively lenient.

136 See Wiesehofer (2001), 51.

137 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 5.3.3. Strabo (14.1.23) maintains that the Megabyxos was a eunuch.

138 Burkert (2004), 107.

139 Briant (2002), 38.

- 140 See Burkert (2004), 107; Soudavar (2010), 118–119.
- 141 Briant (2002), 510. See also Wiesehofer (2001), 42–55.
- 142 Episodes from the reigns of Darius and Xerxes demonstrate the implementation of this policy. Thus, when the priests of Apollo conspired against Darius during the Ionian Revolt, the Persians plundered and burned the god's main shrine at Miletus. When they repeated the infraction a decade and a half later, Xerxes pillaged the temple and exiled its priests to distant Bactria. Xerxes similarly chastised Marduk's shrine at Esagila after the god twice declared a native rebel "King of Babylon," and Cilicia lost its status as an independent province for supporting Cyrus the Younger in his unsuccessful bid for the throne in 401 BCE.
- 143 Particularly notable was the manner in which the Persians pacified the Zagros mountaineers who historically lived off the caravans that frequented the Khorasan Road. With a pragmatism beyond the Assyrians' grasp, the Persians forewent the hopeless task of subjecting the Zagros hillmen to traditional rule. Instead, they dealt with them on a strictly tribal level. Each year, when the royal caravan passed through the mountains, the king met with their chieftains and exchanged gifts, as if from one tribal leader to another; see Medvedskaya (2002a). The king's gifts were of course greater and intended to make up for the riches the mountain tribes traditionally acquired through brigandry. The Greeks denigrated these payments as ransoms and took them as a sign of Persian weakness. More realistically, they represented a utilitarian solution to a problem faced by an empire that ruled over vast expanses of rugged terrain.
- 144 See Herodotus 6.42.
- 145 See, for example, Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 210–220. The business activities of the Babylonian Egibi firm expanded to Media soon after Cyrus' conquest of Mesopotamia. Olmstead (1948), 151, comments on the prosperity of the Ionian cities before the Persian Wars. Toynbee (1963a), 669, interprets the information given by Herodotus to demonstrate that the Achaemenids granted important trading colonies along the Euphrates River to the Cilicians.
- 146 See Burn (1962), 143–147; Toynbee (1963b), 418–423.
- 147 Polybius 10.28.
- 148 Cook (1985), 289. Polybius (10.28) explicitly provides that, due to Persian interest in irrigation, many peoples, including the Hyrcanians, "incurred great expense and trouble in making underground channels [*qanats*] reaching a long distance." Diodorus Siculus (2.14) describes the massive *qanat* that multiple communities of Medes dug from Mount Orontes to the valley before Ecbatana. To appreciate the far-sightedness of the Persians' policy

on land improvement, one must consider that *qanat*-building became unpopular in modern Iran due to high project costs, which private persons could not recoup because the shahs immediately laid claim to the irrigated land.

149 See Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.120.

150 Cook (1985), 289.

151 Consider also the events of 522 BCE, when three different men (Cambyses II, the False Bardiya, and Darius I) laid claim to the throne within the short span of seven months. The next occasion on which the empire witnessed a similar turnover in kings was in 424–423 BCE, when four monarchs (Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II, Sogdianus, and Darius II) ruled within the same year.

152 Consider the massive military mobilizations of Darius I for his Scythian campaign of 512 BCE, Xerxes I for the invasion of Greece in 480–479 BCE, Artaxerxes II for the defense at Cunaxa in 401 BCE, and Darius III for the Battles of Issus and Gaugamela in 333 BCE and 331 BCE, respectively. Also consider the pro-Persian resistances offered to Alexander after the breakdown of satrapal authority by certain subject peoples (see page 412).

The Persian *Oecumene* in Reality and Art

1 Isaiah 40:3–40:4, adapted from the translation of S. Smith (1944), 65.

2 Herodotus 5.52, translated by de Sélincourt. Regarding the sophistication of the system, Briant (2012), 194–197, draws attention to the issuance of open letters of credit from the imperial administration to itinerants traveling on government business for the acquisition of rations from warehouses located along the route.

3 Herodotus 5.52.

4 Herodotus 8.98, translated by de Sélincourt (except for the last word, which de Sélincourt Latinizes as *angarium*).

5 Herodotus 8.98. For the Assyrian use of horse relays, see Olmstead (1948), 299; Cook (1983), 108. For pre-Achaemenid roads in Asia Minor, see Mellinck (1988), 216–217.

6 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.17–8.6.18, translated by Miller.

7 See Hallock (1969), 744.

8 Compare *angareion* to the name of Angares, Astyages' minstrel according to Dinon, and the New Persian words for “song” (*ahang*) and “larynx” (*hanjar*). It is also significant that the *angareion* mentioned by Herodotus acted as town criers. According to Herzfeld (1947), 224, *angareion* reflects Assyrian *egirtu*, meaning “letter, message.”

9 Cook (1983), 108, goes even further by estimating that the express

- courier service could travel from Susa to Sardis in less than a week.
- 10 Briant (2002), 371, citing Diodorus Siculus 19.17.6–19.17.7.
- 11 See Pseudo-Aristotle *De Mundo* 398a; Herodotus 9.3; Briant (2002), 371.
- 12 Cook (1983), 107.
- 13 Some scholars have questioned Cyrus' desire to foster trade. It is true that Herodotus (1.153) unequivocally states that the Persian conqueror disdained marketplace antics. However, his contempt for the petty mindset of haggling shopkeepers does not mean that Cyrus failed to appreciate the benefits of trade. The preservation and expansion of trade routes had been an objective of Near Eastern rulers since Assyrian times. According to Sidney Smith, (1944), 39, "the ancient world had economic problems to solve . . . The Assyrians by hard fighting kept open the [trade routes] into Media, Armenia, and Cappadocia for three centuries. After the fall of Nineveh the eastern passes were held by the Medes, the northwestern [routes] were only open by favour of the Cilicians and Lydians, and subject to a treaty." Cyrus could not have been oblivious to the importance of commerce given the attention paid to the subject by his imperial predecessors.
- 14 Strabo 15.3.18, translated by Jones.
- 15 See Darius I, Susa, Inscription f § 3.
- 16 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 214.
- 17 Boulnois (2008), 59–74; Wiesehofer (2001), 147.
- 18 Briant (2002), 929, and (2012), 197, and Needham (1971), 35, insinuate that the Persian highway system may have had a more direct influence on the development of roads in China than is usually thought. Specifically, they draw attention to Confucius' declaration that "the radiation of virtue is faster than the transmission of imperial orders by stages and couriers." These scholars find it curious that the Chinese philosopher made this statement around 495 BCE, by which time the Royal Road had been fully developed.
- 19 Darius' interest in overseas trade is apparent from the sources, which tell of him sending envoys to Carthage, contemplating the subjugation of Sardinia, and dispatching ships to explore the coasts of western Greece, Sicily, and the Crimea; see Justin 19.1.10–19.1.13; Herodotus 5.106, 3.125–3.138; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 16. Under Xerxes, the Persians launched one of the boldest exploratory voyages of antiquity by attempting to circumnavigate Africa with a small fleet of ships that set sail from Phoenicia; see Herodotus 4.43. This expedition advanced beyond the straits of Gibraltar but was forced to turn back somewhere

- between central and southern Africa, when the winds turned against it.
- 20 Babylonian sources mention a “Canal of Gubaru” and a “Harbor of Gubaru” at Sippar; see Dandamaev (1992), 78. Consider also the construction work undertaken at Lahiru, near present-day Kuwait City; see Henkelman (2008a), 39, footnote 104. For the palace at Borazjan, see Cook (1983), 33.
- 21 See Arrian *Indica* 39.9. The Angali Canal, which was dug by the Achaemenids or their Elamite predecessors in the region, extended from Borazjan to the western end of the Bushehr Peninsula; see Henkelman (2008b), 310.
- 22 See Henkelman (2008b), 306; Yaghmaee (2010). Sumner (1986), 23, disputed the identification of *Tamukkan* with Taoce on the basis that the former was located between Neyriz and Pasargadae, but as demonstrated by Henkelman, the Persepolis Fortification Tablets reference two settlements named *Tamukkan*, one of which was located inland, whereas the other was very clearly the port city of Taoce. Elamite *Tamukkan* may reflect Old Persian **Takhmaka*, in this case meaning the “Strong Settlement.”
- 23 See Henkelman (2008b), 305.
- 24 See Potts (2003).
- 25 See Briant (2002), 760.
- 26 Arrian (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 3.8.5, 11.5) and Diodorus (17.110) both mention the Carian community, and Babylonian texts refer to the exiles as the *Banneshu*. Briant (2002), 75, notes a “town of Carians” situated in Babylonia during the reign of Cambyses. Dandamaev (1992), 16, states that the Carians’ fiefs, like those belonging to other nationalities, “existed at the beginning of Cambyses’ reign and, in all probability, were introduced by the Persian administration soon after the conquest of Babylonia.”
- 27 For the suggestion that Scylax belonged to the community of Carian exiles that lived along the Tigris in southern Iraq, see Herzfeld (1947), 646, 658–660, 669, and (1968), 42–43, 347–348. The same author suggests that Scylax was the inspiration for the Sinbad of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Note that Sinbad was supposed to have been a resident of Basra, situated near the Carian colony from which Scylax presumably hailed. The name “Sinbad” reflects a simpler variant of “Sindbad,” which can be traced to Old Persian **Hindu-patish* (“Commander of the Indus”), an apt nickname for the Carian navigator who first explored this river.
- 28 See Herodotus 4.44.
- 29 That this reference to Cyrus served as a form of acknowledgment may be inferred from Darius’ hesitance to acknowledge anyone but

- himself in his inscription. For example, in his canal inscriptions, Darius states that he himself had “seized” Egypt for the Persians, when in fact it was Cambyses who had conquered that land.
- 30 See Dandamaev (1992), 16.
 - 31 See Briant (2002), 794, with references to the sources.
 - 32 See Briant (2002), 75–76; Dandamaev (1992), 16; Sekunda (1992), 83.
 - 33 See Dandamaev (1992), 16–17.
 - 34 See Briant (2002), 76; Dandamaev (1992), 12.
 - 35 See Boyce, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Diaspora, Iranian, i. in Pre-Islamic Times”; Briant (2002), 66.
 - 36 See Herodotus 9.122.
 - 37 See Briant (2002), 347.
 - 38 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.10; Isocrates *Panegyrics* 152.
 - 39 See Briant (2002), 77: “The Persians . . . did not try to spread either their language or their religion.”
 - 40 This sentiment can be deduced from the Achaemenid royal formula: “I am . . . a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan lineage.”
 - 41 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 304.
 - 42 See Weiskopf, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Asia Minor: Irano-Anatolian Relations”; Sekunda (1985), (1988), and (1991).
 - 43 Thus, the Sidonian prince Abdalonymus wears Persian apparel on the so-called “Alexander Sarcophagus.” The Lycian noble in the tomb painting at Karaburun in Turkey dons a Greek or Lydian robe and Iranian jewelry. Arbinas, son of Gergis, wears a Greek outfit on the Nereid monument, and the Persian satrap Pharnabazus sports a Greek helmet on coins from Tarsus.
 - 44 See Briant (2002), 83–84, 504–505; Dusinberre (2003), 156.
 - 45 Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 304.
 - 46 See Soudavar (2010), 118–119; Boyce (1982), 201–204, 268.
 - 47 See Boyce (1982), 28–31, 268–270; Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Babylonia, ii. Babylonian Influences on Iran.”
 - 48 See Bivar (1975a), 93, 96; Kuhrt (1987a), 151; Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Babylonia, ii. Babylonian influences on Iran.”
 - 49 See M. West (1971). Also Boyce (1982), 48–49, 150–163; Burkert (2004); Tsantsanoglou (2006).
 - 50 M. West (1971), 149–150.
 - 51 See M. West (1971), 1–27.
 - 52 Tsantsanoglou (2006) notes a distinct parallel with Zoroastrianism in the idea – documented in the fourth century BCE Derveni

papyrus – that “Wisdom” is the “mightiest” entity and father of all creation.

53 M. West (1971), 241–242.

54 See Martinez-Sève, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Hellenism.”

55 See Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Babylonia, ii. Babylonian Influences on Iran.”

56 See Briant (2002), 77. Boyce (1975), 295, and (1984a), 299, attributes the Persians’ abstinence in attempting to impose their religion upon non-Iranians in part to the burdensome purity rituals of Zoroastrianism, which, though second nature to Iranians born into the religion, were, in all likelihood, too rigorous for non-Iranians to adopt.

57 See Bivar (1975a), 104, (1975b), 286–287.

58 See Bivar (1998), 41–42. Potts (2010), 533, endnote 4, cites a possible link between the odd snake burials conducted at Dilmun, the capital of Achaemenid Bahrain, where the Persian kings sent political prisoners, and the Mithraic mysteries. Equally interesting is the evidence from ancient Tibet. According to various scholars, the pre-Buddhist Bon religion of this land contained distinctly Mithraic elements and was remembered in local tradition as having been brought to Tibet from the west; see Kaloyanov (1990); Harold Bailey’s comments in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies vol. I–II*, ed. John Hinnells (1975), 134; Kuznetsov (1975), 113–114, has speculated that the main proselytizer of this religion in Tibet was an Iranian named Mithradates, and the very name of the faith, “Bon,” has been linked to Old Persian **buna*, meaning “foundation.”

59 For the interpretation of the epithet *Baradates* as “Law-Giver,” see Boyce (1982), 255.

60 Frye (1984), 85.

61 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 (45); Briant (2002), 188.

62 This is because the royal tent was modeled after the king’s palaces; see Briant (2002), 258; Miller (1997), 239; Herzfeld (1947), 810–811.

63 See Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.3.8; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.5.3.

64 See Judith 10:20, where the description of Holophernes’ tent is doubtless based on the Persian king’s tent.

65 See Judith 12:1.

66 See Plutarch *Life of Pericles* 13.5–13.6. How this tent ended up in Athenian hands is itself an interesting story. After the sea fight at Salamis, Xerxes bequeathed his tent to the general Mardonius. When Mardonius was defeated and killed at the Battle of Plataea,

the tent fell to the Greeks. Upon entering the tent and beholding its fine trappings, the Spartan king Pausanias, the victor of Plataea, reportedly exclaimed: “Gentleman, I asked you here in order to show you the folly of the Persians, who, living in this style, came to Greece to rob us of our poverty”; Herodotus 9.83. If Xerxes inherited this tent as an heirloom, it may well have been the same tent used by Cyrus after his conquest of Media. Before his victory over Astyages, Cyrus must have had a much more modest tent, perhaps similar to the yurt depicted on the Arjan bowl from Behbahan; see Stronach (2004).

- 67 See Ezra 6:1–6:2; Ghirshman (1978), 125. Ghirshman concluded that Ecbatana housed the main royal archives, because the gold tablets of Arsames and Ariaramnes were discovered there.
- 68 Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 8.6.22) states that the Persian kings spent the two months of high summer in Ecbatana. According to Athenaeus (*Deipnosophists* 12.513–12.514), the Achaemenids spent the spring in Babylon, the summer in Ecbatana, the fall in Persia, and the winter in Susa.
- 69 See Olmstead (1948), 162; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.22.
- 70 Strabo 15.3.2, translated by Jones.
- 71 T. C. Young (1988a), 43–44, states that we may “reasonably suppose” some building activity by Cyrus at Susa, although there is no evidence of it in the archaeological record. Compare to Briant (2002), 165, who denies any construction by Cyrus at the former Elamite capital.
- 72 See Stronach (1978), 9; *Fragments of the Greek Historians* F90 66 40; Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 6.29.
- 73 Stronach (1978), 9–10.
- 74 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 239, on the earlier Elamite settlement at Pasargadae.
- 75 See Boardman (2000), 51–53; Stronach (1985b), 840, and (2008); Nylander (1970).
- 76 Pasargadae did, however, experience fire damage in the wake of an anti-Macedonian uprising in 300 BCE; see Stronach (1978), 155–156.
- 77 See Herzfeld (1941), 225: “Pasargadae . . . and, according to Polybius’ description, [Ecbatana] also was quite different. The isolated houses follow also a common orientation, but they are spread over a vast area, hundred of yards apart. They were connected by a formal garden or park. That was the truly Iranian plan: almost no palace at all, and certainly no fortified palace. It was protected only by a very strong citadel on an adjoining hill. The half-nomadic Iranians had first to get accustomed to settled life

before they agreed to live as townspeople in crowded places. The same process took place when the Arab caliphs, nomads by birth, built the amazing palaces of Samarra, which cover entire square miles. One of them, an octagon of one mile in diameter, was left unfinished because al-Mu'tasim found it 'too narrow.'"

78 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 72 F19. The etymology provided by Anaximenes is untenable for *Passargadai*, since the postulated initial element *Parsa* is unlikely to have changed to *Passar* in Greek. However, the etymology is valid for other suggested reconstructions of the Old Persian name of Cyrus' capital: "Parsagarda" or "Parsagada," the latter given by Quintus Curtius Rufus (5.6.10, 10.1.22). One or both of these may reflect Pasargadae's colloquial designation, featuring an initial element *Parsa* ("Persians") followed by *garda* or *gada*, ("home," "camp," or "fortified settlement"). The second element is attested in several ancient place names, including Tigranocerta ("City of Tigranes"), Darabgerd ("City of Darius"), and Kurush-katha ("Fortified Settlement of Cyrus," Cyropolis).

79 Boucharlat (2002), 280.

80 See Xenophon *Oeconomicus* (4.20–4.25).

81 Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 4.10–4.11, translated by Dakyns. There appears to be some conflation of Cyrus the Great and Cyrus the Younger in this passage. The mentioned gifts for the warriors and farmers may allude to the presents that later Persian kings are documented as having offered to the different social classes on the Nowruz.

82 Thus, Darius I applauded the efforts of his officer Gadatas, who imported new plants from Asia Minor to Babylonia and Across the River: "That you cultivate my land by transplanting [to Ionia] the fruits of [Abarnahara] I commend your purpose, and because of this there shall be laid up for you great favor in the king's house."

83 On the central garden at Pasargadae as the first known Persian paradise and its integration of outdoor space constituting a fundamental feature of subsequent Persian architecture, see T. C. Young (1988a), 45; Stronach (1997a), 52–53. On the basis of particular chisel marks found in certain irrigation channels of the Pasargadae garden, Stronach speculates that Darius either completed or modified the original design.

84 See Stronach (1985b), 842.

85 See Stronach and Gopnik, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Pasargadae," who note that the existence of the *aladlammus* is a modern assumption based on the many pieces of sculptured hair and the fragment of a crown found by Herzfeld. Stronach and Gopnik further state: "The overall concept of Gate R is without precedent.

Although monumental gateways had long been associated with ceremonial display in the Near East, the idea of divorcing the gateway from an associated wall appears here for the first time . . . This splendid isolation strengthens the symbolic power of the gate, which is now purely monumental in effect. It is indeed possible that Cyrus may have intended to endow the structure with even greater meaning. Cyrus may have been displaying both the strength of an empire that had little need of static defenses, and the benevolence of a ruler who sought to welcome rather than exclude the peoples of his dominions.”

86 See Porada (1969), 168–169, on the absence of standardized Persian royal iconography before Cyrus.

87 See Garrison (2009), 12, for a recent explanation of the winged figure as a guardian spirit: “The visual dynamic in Gate R may have been specifically construed toward concrete concepts of imperial power as well as broader concepts of protection; i.e., the bull colossi project concepts of royal power outward, while the four-winged figures . . . focused inwardly, to a nexus of potentially numinous interaction centered, perhaps, on the figure of Cyrus himself.” See also Mallowan (1985), 394: “[Gate R] must have served as a processional way and portal of access to the larger hypostyle palaces, Palaces P and S, which were in the vicinity, and we can imagine the intention, namely that the king should pass on his way to the state apartments and ceremonial halls under the cover of his guardian angel.”

88 Stronach (1985b), 842.

89 Mallowan (1985), 393.

90 See Barnett (1969), 419–421. Stronach (1985b), 843, concludes that Cyrus intended the winged figure to symbolize distant conquests in the west “from the name of the great Persepolis portal, ‘The Gate of All Lands,’ and from the fact that Xerxes chose to erect an Egyptian statue of his father, in which Darius is shown in a traditional Egyptian pose, beside one of the entrances of the ‘king’s gate’ at Susa.”

91 Barnett (1969), 420–422.

92 See Olmstead (1948), 63.

93 See Barnett (1969), 420–422; Mallowan (1985), 393. Black and Green (1992), 165–166, tentatively identify the smiting god and lion-headed monster with the Mesopotamian deities Lulal and Latarak, respectively. These deities were believed to repel evil spirits that lurked in the dark corners of rooms; see Wiggermann (1992). But the lion headed monster could just as well represent Ugallu, the protector of Nergal’s domain.

94 See Stronach (1997a), 45. It is also possible that Cyrus based the

relief on an earlier copy of an Assyrian original in Ecbatana. What little we know about Median art indicates that it was indistinguishable from Assyrian art; see Curtis (2003).

- 95 Although Cyrus and his architects likely learned the Mesopotamian lore behind the mythological creatures depicted at Pasargadae, the majority of Persians understood them as symbols of imperial might, subject to identification with Iranian gods and demons. According to Herzfeld (1947), 822–823, the Persians identified the human-headed winged bulls of the royal palaces with the demigod Gopatshah. However, Potts (2002) argues against this view, as well as against the common identification of these mythical creatures with the *lamassus* of Mesopotamian literature (he prefers to call them *aladlammus*). Duchesne-Guillemin (1970), 92–95, interprets the human-headed winged bulls as representations of the wind god Vayu, whom the Iranians believed held the heavens apart from the earth. According to Soudavar (2012), the Iranians identified the fish-cloaked Ea with the Avestan deity Apam Napat, the “Scion of the Waters.”
- 96 Stronach (1997a), 45, suggests that, like the Mesopotamians, the western Iranians put faith in the protective functions of these images, but this can hardly be, for images of the sort are not employed at Persepolis, where construction began approximately ten years after Cyrus’ death. It is conceivable that the Iranians interpreted the figures engraved on the walls of Cyrus’ palace to signify the Achaemenid king’s mastery over the Daivas, an important trait of several kings in the *Shahnameh*, some of whom were remembered for building impressive palaces.
- 97 This building had a unique design on account of its two long and open porticoes. Ghirshman (1964), 134, compares the building to the vast, open-ended tents of the Qajar kings, which enabled guests to dine beneath one or the other of two awnings based on the position of the sun. According to Huff (2005), 382–383, Palace P resembled Qajar-period palaces in that it had two stories, the uppermost of which contained the apartments of the royal women.
- 98 Stronach (1985b), 845.
- 99 See Stronach (1978), 95–97.
- 100 Root (1979), 51–58, suggests that the sculpture was carved toward the end of Cyrus’ reign. See also the epigraphic argument of Vallat (2011), 278, regarding the inscription on Cyrus’ robe (Appendix I). Regarding the application of gold leaf to Cyrus’ robe, see Herzfeld (1941), 255–257.
- 101 According to Wiesehofer (2001), 32, the roof of the Zendan may have been used for royal coronations. Boyce (1982), 58–60, interprets the building as the tomb in which the remains of Cyrus’

family members were stored. To support her interpretation, she notes that twenty-nine steps once led to the structure's entrance and that, in Zoroastrianism, one can come within thirty paces of dead bodies without losing ritual purity. For the Zendan as a temple to Anahita, see Ghirshman (1964), 229–230.

102 See Stronach (1985b), 853.

103 See Herodotus 1.132.

104 See Appian (*Mithradatic Wars* § 66); Briant (2002), 243. Appian's passage concerns a religious ritual conducted by Mithradates VI Eupator, the Iranian ruler of Pontus, following his victory over the Roman commander Lucius Licinius Murena in 82 BCE: "He [Mithradates] offered sacrifice to Zeus Stratios [Ahuramazda] on a tall stack of wood placed on a high mountain, according to the following traditional custom. To begin, the kings bring wood, and after installing on the nearby plain a mound of less importance, they place on the higher of the two hearths milk, honey, wine, oil, and all sorts of aromatics to burn; as for what is found in the plain, they place on top bread and something for the helpers' meal. This is also the type of sacrifice practiced by the Persian kings at Pasargadae. Then they light the wood. When it burns, it is so great that it can be seen from far off . . . and, as the air burns, they say it is impossible to approach for several days."

105 See Stronach (1985b), 853–854.

106 See Jacobs (2010), 95, who cites the example of Sennacherib abandoning Dur Sharrukin after Sargon II died in battle.

107 For the allocation of work, see Darius I, Susa, Inscription f.

108 See Potts (1999), 312; Herzfeld (1941), 215.

109 See Ghirshman (1978), 133.

110 See Culican (1965), 58.

111 See Boardman (2000), 53–60. The closest known parallel in Iran is the Gur-e Dokhtar at Bozpar in Fars. Scholars initially identified the Bozpar tomb, which is smaller than the one at Pasargadae, as the mausoleum of Cyrus I. However, the current view is that the Bozpar tomb dates to the fifth century BCE. According to Boyce (1982), 56–57, Cyrus' tomb was designed to comply with Zoroastrian purity laws, which prohibited the contamination of the elements by dead matter. Specifically, she points to the fact that the tomb chamber was located high above the ground. She also observes that the tomb is divided into three basic units, consisting of the three deep set lower tiers, the three less prominent upper tiers, and the tomb chamber. The number three is sacred to Zoroastrians and features prominently in their funerary rites. Jacobs (2010) refutes the notion, asserted by some scholars, that

the disparity in design between the tombs of Cyrus and Darius demonstrates that the two kings did not share the same religion.

112 See Stronach (1978), 35–37. Today, the remains of the carving are very faint, and the upper half of the design, together with the tip of the gable end, is no longer present.

113 See Soudavar (2010), 118; Boyce (1982), 57. The quoted text is from Stronach and Gopnik, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Pasargadae.”

114 Ghirshman (1978), 136.

115 The Tibetan map, which first came to light during the 1960s, is discussed at length by Stronach (1977) and, in less detail, by Edwards (1996), 82. The map is inscribed in Tibetan and appears in the Zhang-Zhung dictionary, which documents the language and grammar of Tibet’s Bon religion. On the map, the names of cities are written in tiny squares. The map distinguishes Pasargadae both by name (*Bar-po-so-brgyad*) and by a pictorial representation of Cyrus’ tomb. The latter structure is identified by a brief caption as the “Swastika Mountain with Nine Stories” (in Tantric Buddhist iconography, the swastika serves as the symbol of the sun and entirely lacks the sinister associations attached to the icon in recent times). Other features of Pasargadae mentioned in the map include the “Crystal Pillars with Inscriptions,” ostensibly the highly polished antae of Palaces P and S, which still bear the inscription “I am Cyrus, the King, the Achaemenid,” and four gardens, each named after an important Buddhist symbol (the lotus, wheel, pearl, and jewel). The latter may represent the four quadrants of Cyrus’ paradise, which, in turn, possibly signified the four quadrants of the world; see Lincoln (2003), 142. Other Iranian locations that have been tentatively identified on the map include Persepolis, Media, Elam, and Carmania; Babylon and Jerusalem are also mentioned. According to Stronach, the earliest edition of the Tibetan draft may date back to the seventh century CE. But various features indicate that this edition was adapted from earlier local versions that were, in turn, based on a Persian original prepared around 300 BCE.

With Horse and Bow: The Ancient Persian Army

1 See Briant (2002), 783–800, for a critical assessment and rejection of the Greek accounts of Persian military weakness. Cawkwell (2005), 237–254, also goes to great lengths to rehabilitate the reputation of the Persian army.

2 Herodotus 6.112.

3 It was with immense pride that Darius I had engraved on the façade of his tomb a relief depicting representatives from all the empire’s subject nations raising his throne. The accompanying text declares:

“ ‘If now thou shalt think, ‘How many were the lands that King Darius held?’ Behold the images of those who bear the throne. Then shalt thou know, then shall it be made known to thee: the spear of the Persian man has advanced far! Then shall it be made known to thee: the Persian man has delivered battle against the foe far away from Persia.” In another inscription, Darius admonished his successor: “If you shall think thus, ‘May I fear no one,’ then protect this Persian army; if the Persian army shall be protected, then for long eternity shall your pride remain unbroken.” See Kent (1953), 136, 138.

- 4 Most scholars maintain that the Old Persian word *kara* denoted the old tribal host, whereas the professional army that the Achaemenids developed was called the **spatha*, attested as a component of Old Persian *spathamaidaya* – “in the military camp” or “battlefield” – and in Middle Persian as *spah* and in New Persian as *sepah*, “army”; see Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran”; Frye (1984), 119. However, the available evidence does not support this distinction, for the Achaemenids retained the military title **karanaya*, or “leader of the *kara*” (transliterated in Greek as *karanos*), until the end of the fifth century BCE, by which time the professional army was fully established; see Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.4.3. So it could be that, during the Achaemenid period, the terms *kara* and *spatha* represented distinct but closely related concepts, such as “army” and “military,” respectively.
- 5 See Herodotus 1.125.
- 6 One must always be wary of using the *Cyropaedia* for biographical information, as Xenophon did not intend this text to serve as a true historical account. However, having served in the army of Cyrus the Younger and spent many years fighting against the Persians in Asia Minor, Xenophon was well acquainted with Persian military practices, so one should hope that the *Cyropaedia*’s account of military developments is fairly reliable. At minimum, Xenophon’s account of the evolution of the Persian army represents an educated guess by a near contemporary as to how Cyrus II implemented his military reforms. See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 2.1.16, 2.1.24–2.1.28, 4.3, 6.1.27–6.1.30, 7.5.66, 8.6.9–8.6.15.
- 7 Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.3) understood that the Medes were better horsemen than the Persians. Drews (2004), 136, describes Xenophon’s statement as “egregious” in light of ancient Iranian equestrian traditions and the repeated statements of Darius and other rulers of his line that Persia was a land “possessed of good horses.” By contrast, Cook (1983), 40–41, 101, tends to believe Xenophon on the strength of later sources and the fact that Fars,

unlike Media, never had a reputation as good horse country. It should be noted that both the Elamites and the sedentary population of Kerman used donkeys to pull their chariots, and this practice would have been unthinkable if they had access to large supplies of good warhorses.

8 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.67–7.5.70.

9 As Toynbee (1962c), 481, points out, the development of a standing army in an expanding state does not always represent a practical measure dictated by the need to maintain a permanently active fighting force. It also occurs in response to changing social conditions. Thus, in the cases of the Assyrian Empire and the Roman Republic, “it was the ruin of a warlike peasantry, which had been uprooted from the soil by perpetual calls to military service on ever more distant campaigns, that made a standing army both possible and necessary – possible because there was now a reservoir of unemployed ‘manpower’ to draw upon, and necessary because these men who had lost their livelihood on the land must be provided with alternative employment if they were to be restrained from venting their unhappiness and resentment through the channel of revolution.” There are indications that Persia suffered from a glut of “uprooted” peasants during the sixth century BCE, and according to Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.67–7.5.68), the Ten Thousand Immortals, the core of the Persian standing army, were recruited from among the poorest Persians.

10 See Herodotus 4.128, 1.119–1.120.

11 Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 7, translated by Dryden.

12 Herodotus 7.61, translated by de Sélincourt.

13 In his recent study of Achaemenid seal engravings, Xin (2010), 551–552, has shown that scale vests were prestige items that distinguished members of the Achaemenid army – particularly foot soldiers – from other Iranian warriors. Schmidt uncovered large quantities of small metal scales, ostensibly used in armor, at Persepolis, and fragments of bronze armor have also been found at Pasargadae; see Schmidt (1957), 100; Kuhrt (2007a), 280–281.

14 Herodotus’ story (9.22) of the death of Masistius, the Persian cavalry commander at the Battle of Plataea, shows how impenetrable Persian armor could be. According to Herodotus, Masistius fell from his horse during a cavalry charge and was swarmed by Greek hoplites, who kept stabbing at his torso with their spears. “No blow upon the corselet had any effect,” and Masistius died only when his assailants struck him through the eye.

15 See Head (1992), 23, 25, 27.

16 It is often stated, on the basis of Herodotus (9.62), that the Persian infantry spear was short and that it barely exceeded the height of a

man. However, this does not seem to have been the case for the heavy infantry, as the famous Susa reliefs, now in the Louvre, depict the Immortals carrying spears that are about two feet taller than the soldiers who bear them. We may trust the Susa reliefs over the majority of those at Persepolis, which show shorter spears, because the artists at Susa, unlike most of their counterparts at Persepolis, did not have to fit their subjects within short vertical registers. The guardsmen in the famous Persepolis audience scenes also carry long spears.

- 17 See Litvinsky, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Helmet, i. in Pre-Islamic Iran.” In addition to the helmets mentioned by Litvinsky, archaeologists have discovered a sixth century BCE iron helmet from Sardis that may have belonged to a Persian soldier who perished during the capture of the city; see Greenewalt, Jr. and Heywood (1992).
- 18 See McLeod (1965), 1–13.
- 19 According to Head (1992), 39–44, the Persians began to use peltasts only after the Persian Wars due to the ability of these skirmishers to disrupt the coordinated march of a hoplite phalanx. However, a Persian peltast appears on the famous Erechtheum frieze, which depicts a battle from either 490 BCE or 479.
- 20 See Head (1992), 26. The customary ten-man Persian infantry file was deeper than the typical Greek infantry file, which extended only eight men deep.
- 21 See Herodotus 9.61, 9.99, 9.102. Consider also the vase painting reproduced by Head (1992), 23.
- 22 See Head (1992), 24–27.
- 23 Based on a Middle Persian military title written as *M’dknpt*, Sekunda (1983), 70, has reconstructed the Old Persian name of the Immortals as **Amartaka*. Meanwhile, other scholars have pleaded for an Old Persian term **Anausha*, which, like **Amartaka*, means “undying, eternal.” Because **Anausha* resembles Old Persian *anushiya*, meaning “follower,” a word frequently attested in the Bisutun Inscription, it is sometimes thought that the corps’ true name meant the “Followers,” and that Herodotus or his Persian informant mistakenly transmitted it as the “Immortals”; see Frye (1984), 109. This seems unlikely, however, for the Sasanids also called their Immortal warriors the *Jayitan* (New Persian *Javidan*). Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Immortals,” suggests that the name of the corps may simply reflect “the idea of immortality so characteristic of a military society.” The flower-wreaths that the Immortals wore around their heads during ceremonial occasions – see Herodotus 7.41 – may have symbolized martyrdom, a concept that the Iranians often associated with fertility. Consider also the

- name of the elite Sasanid cavalry unit of the *Gyan-avspara*, or “those who sacrifice their lives.”
- 24 Herodotus 7.84, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 25 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 12.514c. Also Herodotus 7.41.
- 26 See Frye (1963), 104.
- 27 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 12.514d. It is perhaps noteworthy that Herodotus, who occasionally denotes the elite divisions of Persian infantry simply as “spearmen” or “bodyguards,” has the young Cyrus appoint some of his friends as bodyguards while playing “king” in Media; see Herodotus 1.114.
- 28 If one assumes that the Medes served as the main intermediaries through which Assyrian military practices reached the Persians, then the Immortals’ Median heritage becomes even more certain. The Immortals’ very name, the Old Persian form of which remains uncertain, recalls the heroic epithets bestowed upon the elite units of the Assyrian army. Furthermore, as Tallis (2005), 215, and (2010), 309–312, has demonstrated, Herodotus (7.41) describes a parade of the Immortals in a manner reminiscent of the procession of the Assyrian royal guard. Specifically, he provides that during one expedition, the Immortals marched in parade with garlands around their heads and their spears pointed downward. A similar scene featuring regiments of garlanded soldiers carrying upside-down spears occurs in an Assyrian bas-relief from Nineveh. Assyrian influence on Persian military practices is hardly surprising given the Assyrians’ numerous contributions to ancient Near Eastern warfare.
- 29 See Pausanias 6.5.1–6.5.8.
- 30 Herodotus. 7.83, translated by Rawlinson.
- 31 Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.3.13.
- 32 Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 4.3.2, translated by Miller) offers other reasons why the Persians sometimes brought their wives and concubines with them on the march: “For even unto this day all who go to war in Asia take with them to the field what they prize most highly; for they say that they would do battle the more valiantly, if all that they hold dearest were there.”
- 33 See Herodotus 7.84.
- 34 I have adapted this list from the translation offered by Head (1992), 70, with certain modifications based on the comments of Tuplin (2010), 125–126. For different translations, see Briant (2002), 598; Kuhrt (2007a), 722–723. Certain translations list a shield and mace as part of the cavalryman’s arsenal.
- 35 Greek artists often depicted the legendary Amazons in “effeminate” Persian garb and, beginning in the middle of the fifth century BCE,

Greek vase paintings show Amazon horse-riders carrying light crescent-shaped shields across their backs; see Sekunda (1992), 21. Arrian (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 4.4.4) mentions the existence of shield-bearing Saka horsemen at the Battle of Gaugamela, and I have seen a pre-Achaemenid figurine depicting a cavalryman carrying a shield in the conventional manner in the National Museum of Beirut. Nevertheless, the invention, by the fourth century BCE Persian general Datames, of the “arm” (Greek *cheir*), a metal sleeve comprised of overlapping lamellar plates, suggests that shields were difficult to carry on horseback and that a better alternative for personal defense had to be sought.

36 A Persian heavy cavalryman may appear in the background between Alexander and Darius III in the so-called Alexander Mosaic, which is believed to depict the Battle of Issus. For more certain depictions of Persian heavy cavalry, see Sekunda (1992), 25, 28; Dedeuoglu (2003), 62. Regarding possible earlier allusions to Persian knights, consider the armor worn by the cavalry commander Masistius at the Battle of Plataea. In addition to an impenetrable scale cuirass, Masistius donned a metal helmet with face-mask; see Plutarch (*Life of Aristides* § 14). A number of scholars have categorized Masistius as a cataphract; see Evans (1986–1987), 99–100; Toynbee (1963a), 688. Compare to Tuplin (2010), 157. Furthermore, Aeschylus (*The Persians* 318) mentions a squadron of 30,000 “Black Cavalry” that may refer to fully panoplied knights in dark armor.

37 See Healy (1991), 61; Roux (1992), 349.

38 See Herodotus 5.111, describing the horse of the Persian general Artybius.

39 Rahe (1980), 85.

40 Rahe (1980), 85.

41 See Xenophon *On Horsemanship* 13.12 and *Hellenica* 3.4.13–3.4.14.

42 The Kinsmen Cavalry were recruited from the highest echelons of the Persian nobility – that is, from those nobles who were deemed honorary relatives of the king.

43 See Darius I, Susa, Inscription s.

44 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.1.27–6.1.30. Also Arrian *Tactical Handbook* 19.4.

45 See Rahe (1980), 85–87. Because Herodotus does not mention scythed chariots, some military historians date their development to the period immediately after the Persian Wars on the basis that they were designed for the purpose of fighting Greek hoplites; see Nefiodkin (2004). However, with respect to military matters, Herodotus is not particularly detail-oriented, and Indian texts seem

- to mention the use of scythed chariots by King Ajatashatru during the early decades of the fifth century BCE. On this basis, Sekunda (1992), 26, and Gabriel (2002), 213–214, are inclined to accept Xenophon's claim that Cyrus II invented these vehicles.
- 46 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.1.29–30, translated by Miller.
- 47 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 6.2.17. The armoring of the chariot horses represented an improvement upon the tactics employed by early Assyrian emperors, who protected their chariot steeds by flanking them with one or two unharnessed “expendable” horses.
- 48 Quintus Curtius Rufus 4.15.3–4.15.4, 4.15.17. The reference is to the Battle of Gaugamela, fought between the Persians and Macedonians in 331 BCE. Diodorus Siculus (17.58, translated by Welles) offers an equally gory description of the same battle: “Such was the keenness and force of the scythes ingeniously contrived to do harm that they severed the arms of many, shield and all, and in no small number of cases they cut through necks and sent heads tumbling to the ground with the eyes still open and the expression of the countenance unchanged, and in other cases they sliced through ribs with mortal gashes and inflicted a quick death.”
- 49 See Aeschylus *The Persians* 84. The designation of this vehicle as “Syrian” suggests that the Persian royal chariot was modeled after the ornamental chariots of the Assyrian kings. Alternatively, it may indicate that the Persian royal chariot was conventional rather than scythed – assuming that scythed chariots existed at this early date and were considered to be of Persian design.
- 50 Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.3.16.
- 51 Strabo 15.3.18. According to Strabo, the cadets were called *Cardacas* in Persian, a term that supposedly connoted the “manly spirit.” However, Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Kardakes,” has pointed out that other references to the term seem to designate trained groups of itinerant professional soldiers or mercenaries. Some scholars have proposed a connection between the *Cardacas* and the Kurds.
- 52 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.2.12.
- 53 See Sekunda (1992), 5.
- 54 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.2.15.
- 55 According to Herodotus (3.127), the satrap Oroetes had a personal guard of 1,000 Persian spearmen. It is likely that all the imperial satraps had as many spearmen in their service. The Bisutun Inscription (§ 24, 40) references armies stationed in palaces and cantons.
- 56 It is interesting to note that Quintus Curtius Rufus (4.13.5) believed that the eastern Iranians were physically larger than the

- Greeks: “The first thing to greet the Macedonians would be the terrifying sight of Scythians and Bactrians with their shaggy faces and long hair, and their enormous stature”
- 57 See Aeschylus *The Persians* 732–733; Herodotus 8.113.
- 58 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.2. Xenophon’s observation finds confirmation in the appointment of a Hyrcanian commander of the Apple-Bearers under Xerxes I.
- 59 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran,” and (2005), 104–105.
- 60 See Quintus Curtius Rufus (5.10.2): “Among these peoples [the eastern Iranians] the king commands extraordinary respect; his name is enough to make them assemble, and the veneration he enjoys in prosperity remains with him in adversity.”
- 61 Isocrates *Panegyricus* 4.145. See also Cawkwell (2005), 238–239; Head (1992), 12; T. C. Young (1988b), 92.
- 62 In the *Anabasis* (4.3–4.4), Xenophon mentions Chaldaean, Chalybian, and Taochian mercenaries in the pay of the local satrap. Elsewhere (*Anabasis* 7.8.15), he refers to Assyrian hoplites and Hyrcanian cavalrymen who were in the king’s pay. The Kurds may have been another source of mercenaries.
- 63 See Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 229.
- 64 See Herodotus 7.23; Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.3.14. According to Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 229, the military leaders had to ensure the availability of such markets.
- 65 See Rahe (1980), 90.
- 66 See Head (1992), 13–14.
- 67 See Rahe (1980), 90–93. Failure to satisfy the military or tax requirements incidental to *hatru* occupancy usually resulted in the forfeiture of the *hatru*’s crops, not of the land itself.
- 68 Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 149–150, observe that an Akkadian text composed in Sippar in 523 BCE refers to the “horse-estate” as *bit-aspatum*, with the Median component, *aspa* (“horse”), instead of Old Persian *asa*. From this piece of evidence, the authors speculate that “it is possible to propose that the system of conscription plots was borrowed by the Persian administration from the Medes,” but that “it cannot be ruled out that the latter, in turn, had taken it from the Assyrians.” Briant (2002), 75, asserts that discernible precedents seem to exist in Neo-Babylonian records but that Cyrus and Cambyses gave impetus and new significance to the system of land allotments, albeit primarily for agricultural gain.
- 69 See MacGinnis (2010), on the military contributions of Babylonian temples.
- 70 See Head (1992), 16.

- 71 Herodotus 1.76, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 72 See Herodotus 1.171.
- 73 Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.15.4, regarding the army of Darius III at Gaugamela. Also Briant (2002), 195–200.
- 74 See Dandamaev (1992), 16.
- 75 See Herodotus 7.59–101.
- 76 See Briant (2002), 196; Cawkwell (2005), 243. The descriptions of Achaemenid military processions given by Herodotus (7.40–7.41) and Quintus Curtius Rufus (8.3.8–8.3.28) also suggest that the vast majority of foreign troops accompanied the baggage train, as one would expect of mere service personnel.
- 77 See Herodotus 3.67.
- 78 See the translation of the Murashu archive concerning Gadallama's military service in Briant (2002), 598.
- 79 See Briant (2002), 411, 1035–36.
- 80 That Median Gabae served as a mustering ground is evident from its later name, Esfahan (Old Persian **Spadana*, or the “Military Camp”).
- 81 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran.”
- 82 Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.10.12. The eagle's significance had to do with the legend of Achaemenes, whom the Persians believed had been nurtured by such a bird. Harmatta (1979a), 317–318, argues – unconvincingly – that the eagle symbolized the Babylonian deity Anzu and was only emblazoned upon the royal standard of the Achaemenids during the reign of Artaxerxes II, who was of part-Babylonian descent. Sekunda (1992), 12, emphasizes the eagle's role as an Iranian symbol of kingship long before the time of Artaxerxes II.
- 83 Sekunda (1992), 18, suspects the standard-bearer to have been a Saka mercenary.
- 84 See Cawkwell (2005), 243–251.
- 85 Consider that Babylon, the largest Near Eastern city of the sixth century BCE, had a population of only 300,000 inhabitants.
- 86 Herodotus 1.214, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 87 Herodotus 6.29, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 88 See Herodotus 9.18, on the cavalry's inability to attack a closely formed body of infantry.
- 89 Herodotus 9.49, translated by de Sélincourt. Cavalry maneuvers had to be well timed and coordinated. At Plataea, for instance, the Persian horsemen only noticed the death of their leader, when, after having regrouped from a sortie, they realized that “there was no one to give any orders”; see Herodotus 9.22. Arrian (*The*

Campaigns of Alexander 3.15) likewise emphasizes the importance of communication in cavalry maneuvers by highlighting its absence during the last-ditch fight at Gaugamela: “The ensuing struggle was the fiercest of the whole action; one after another the Persian squadrons wheeled in file to the charge; breast to breast they hurled themselves on the enemy; conventional cavalry tactics – maneuvering, javelin-throwing – were forgotten; it was every man for himself.”

- 90 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran.”
- 91 This is the famous quote that the Persian ambassador delivered to the Spartan Dieneces; see Herodotus 7.226. The disadvantage was that, when the Persian wall of shields was breached, the enemy could inflict severe casualties upon the unprotected archers. Tallis (2005), 214, is inclined to view the Achaemenid use of massed foot-archers as an Elamite inheritance. However, it may just as well have developed as a means of fending off large cavalry forces, such as those that overran Iran during the nomadic invasions of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. According to Drews (2004), these invasions revolutionized warfare in the ancient Near East.
- 92 See Herodotus 1.162.
- 93 See Herodotus 4.200.
- 94 See Herodotus 1.84.
- 95 Herodotus 6.18.
- 96 See Cook (1983), 105; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Army, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran.” Gabriel (2002), 213–214, attributes the introduction of the catapult in India during the early decades of the fifth century BCE to Achaemenid military influence.
- 97 See Cawkwell (2005), 28.
- 98 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.23.
- 99 Darius I, Naqsh-e Rostam, Inscription b, translated by Kent (1953), 140.
- 100 See Herodotus 5.105, 7.54. One wonders whether the royal practice, attested from the Safavid period onward, of wearing scarlet “robes of wrath” during declarations of war originated under the Achaemenids. After all, red was the special color of the warrior class in ancient Iran.
- 101 Herodotus 7.40–7.41, 7.55; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.9–8.3.18; Quintus Curtius Rufus 8.3.8–8.3.28.
- 102 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.1.2.
- 103 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (29), as interpreted by Tuplin (forthcoming) and Llewellyn-Jones and Robson.
- 104 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.1.41–7.1.44, *Hellenica* 3.1.7.

Elsewhere in the *Cyropaedia* (3.2.12) Cyrus orders his surgeons to tend to his wounded Chaldean adversaries.

105 S. Smith (1944), 33.

106 Mallowan (1985), 417.

107 The sources offer four examples of Cyrus' military chicanery: (1) giving Astyages false intelligence concerning the arrival of reinforcements before the Battle of Pasargadae (Polyaenus 7.6.1–7.6.9); (2) using camels to throw the Lydian cavalry into disorder (Herodotus 1.80); (3) abandoning his camp for the Sakas to loot, so that he could later surprise them while they were inebriated (Strabo 11.8.5); and (4) implementing the same stratagem as in (3) against the Massagetae (Herodotus 1.211). During the last engagement, Cyrus reportedly left behind a small detachment of Persian troops as bait, knowing that they would be slaughtered.

108 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 5.3.46–5.3.50; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 7.88. These authors went so far as to state that Cyrus knew the name of every man in his army, which is clearly impossible. More believable are Xenophon's repeated assertions (*Cyropaedia* 2.3.19–2.3.20, 5.4.17, 8.2.24–8.2.25) regarding Cyrus's care for his wounded soldiers.

109 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.4.12.

110 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.26–8.3.32.

111 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.30, translated by Miller.

112 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.1.34.

113 See, for example, Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.2.6.

114 See Herodotus 1.89. The famously avaricious Nader Shah employed the same tactic centuries later.

115 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.2.22, translated by Miller.

116 As evident from the Cyrus Cylinder: "My numerous troops marched peacefully through Babylon."

Cyrus the Father: The Glory Days of Cyrus King of Persia

1 On the Persians' original costume, see Herodotus 1.71.

2 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 4.146c.

3 Episodes from the later history of the Achaemenid period elucidate the premium that the kings placed on attracting celebrities to the royal court. Thus, Herodotus (3.137) states that the Greek wrestler Milo of Croton, a six-time winner of the Olympic Games, enjoyed an excellent reputation at the court of Darius I, where "his name counted for a lot." Meanwhile, Galen and Plutarch relate that Artaxerxes I tried unsuccessfully to lure the Greek physician Hippocrates to Susa.

- 4 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 4.146c, citing lost passages of Ctesias and Dinon. This figure is believable, as Persepolis Fortification Tablet 702 documents a single transaction involving the delivery of 17,830 liters of flour to Darius' court. Based on comparison to other tablets in the Persepolis archives, historians have estimated that this amount of flour could feed 11,886 people; see Briant (2002), 290.
- 5 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 4.145e.
- 6 See Nehemiah 5:17.
- 7 See Esther 1:9; Herodotus 5.18.
- 8 Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 4.145e.
- 9 Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 9.393c.
- 10 See, for example, Herodotus 1.33, 1.212. According to Plutarch (*Life of Artaxerxes* § 6), Cyrus the Younger regularly cited his superior alcohol tolerance as proof that he was better qualified to rule than his brother. Similarly, the Macedonians heard that Darius I had boasted: "I could drink a lot of wine, and still stand it well"; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 10.434d.
- 11 Herodotus 1.133.
- 12 Strabo 15.3.20.
- 13 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 11.464a.
- 14 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 10.434d, citing the account of the Mithrakana given by Ctesias and Duris of Samos. Also Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Dance, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran." It is true that Ctesias and Duris seem to speak of the late Achaemenids, under whom Mithra received official recognition as a god of state. However, one might suspect that the earlier kings of the dynasty, who were at best equivocal toward Mithra, maintained the nationalistic elements of the festival, despite, perhaps, disassociating it from Mithra. Consider Biruni's mention of a "Zoroastrianized" version of the fall festival, which commemorated Ahuramazda's creation of the earth and the bodies of mankind; see Biruni *The Chronicles of Ancient Nations*, translated by Sachau (1879), 208.
- 15 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 6.1.10.
- 16 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.4.12. The fall equinox marked the festival of Mithrakana, which was sacred to Mithra.
- 17 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 13.608a; Briant (2002), 293.
- 18 See Polyaeus 4.3.32, as analyzed by Briant (2002), 286–289.
- 19 See Briant (2002), 315, quoting Jean Bottero.
- 20 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Hunting in Iran, i. In the Pre-Islamic Period."
- 21 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.3.15, 1.4.7–1.4.15. Consider that Old

Persian **nakhuschara* refers to a specific form of hunting involving the trapping of prey and Herodotus (3.148, 6.31) states that Persian soldiers “netted” the inhabitants of the Greek islands by lining up side by side and marching from one end of the island to another, driving all the people before them.

22 Allsen (2006), 132.

23 See Briant (2002), 298.

24 Thus, Cyrus the Younger bore the scars that he received in his youth while grappling with a she-bear; see Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.9.6. One pre-Islamic prince of Tabarestan reportedly chased a stag for over a hundred miles and swam across a torrential river before killing his quarry; see Allsen (2006), 132.

25 See Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.5.2.

26 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 391–392, states that lion hunting became popular during the Assyrian period when the lands around the Euphrates became infested with lions, which preyed on livestock and occasionally people. At Persepolis, the Elamites bring only lionesses as tribute to the king, ostensibly because the king wanted to show that he alone could subdue the males of the species. An iron dagger, inscribed with the Old Persian legend “Darius, venerator of lions,” appeared on the antiquities market in 1962; see Root (2011), 439.

27 See Alsen (2006), 60.

28 Cook (1985), 231, questions whether woodcarving constituted a favorite hobby of the Achaemenid kings. However, Ctesias (*Epitome of Photius* § 12) claims that Cambyses died after accidentally stabbing himself while carving a piece of wood.

29 Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, 379.

30 See Herodotus 3.89.

31 See Wiesehofer (2001), 37.

32 This development is attested by the relative absence of tribal epithets in the Bisutun Inscription and Persepolis Fortification Tablets; see Cook (1983), 39; Wiesehofer (2001), 37. An exception might be the case of Gobryas, the Royal Spear-Bearer of Darius I and chief of the Patischorian tribe, who seems to have had responsibility for fellow Patischorians in royal employ; see Henkelman (2010), 710, and (2011c), 12.

33 See Herodotus 8.85. On the Old Persian term **varu-sangha*, see Brosius (2006), 40; Shahbazi (1970), 275. The word has the same connotation as New Persian *namdar*, “having a name,” which is synonymous with “nobility.” The Benefactors’ actual title was probably **Huvarzaka*.

34 See Sumner (1986).

- 35 See Briant (2002), 86. The archaeological record is equivocal regarding the development of the Marv Dasht under Cyrus and Cambyses. Structures in the plain that have been attributed to these kings include monuments at Dasht-e Gohar (also known as Takht-e Rostam) and Bagh-e Firuzi; see Mousavi (2012), 49. However, these structures may just as well have been erected after the death of Cambyses II but before the commencement of palace construction at Persepolis; see Boucharlat (2013).
- 36 For the conventional view that Huvadaichaya was located in the Persepolis plain, see Sumner (1984); Briant (2002), 72, 86; Henkelman and Kleber (2007); Arfaee (2008), 23–28. Compare to Hansman (1975), who identifies Huvaïdachaya with the site of Tal-e Zahhak in Fasa.
- 37 See Sumner (1984), 3, 29. Archaeologists have estimated the total sedentary population of the Persepolis plain to have been about 44,000 during the Achaemenid period. By contrast, the 1966 census indicated a population of approximately 140,000; see Sumner (1984), 12.
- 38 See Henkelman (2008b) and (2012). Henkelman defines Old Persian **Gaba* to mean “the valley.”
- 39 See Henkelman (2008b), 314.
- 40 Hansman (1975) has speculated that Cyrus constructed these fortifications as a defensive bulwark against the Medes at the outset of his reign, but because the moat is an element of Babylonian architectural design unattested at pre-imperial Iranian sites, the likelier scenario is that the existing structures at Tal-e Zahhak were built after the Persian conquest of Babylon.
- 41 See Bailey (1975). Also Hansman (1975), 304–306.
- 42 See Hansman (1975).
- 43 See Herodotus 1.89, 1.210.
- 44 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.21.
- 45 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia*, 8.3.21, translated by Miller.
- 46 See Duncker (1881), 328–332. We may speculate that Vindafarnah’s ancestors belonged to the Maspiian or Maraphian tribe.
- 47 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.14.
- 48 See Herodotus 3.118–3.119.
- 49 See Herodotus 3.68.
- 50 See Herodotus 3.84; Briant (2002), 132–135. In Hellenistic and Roman times, the Iranian rulers of Cappadocia and Pontus even claimed descent from Otanes, who is said to have received vast domains in Anatolia.
- 51 This is implied by Dandamaev (1989), 101, 106–107, and Burn

- (1962), 95, 108.
- 52 See Herodotus 3.68.
- 53 See Hansman (1975), 289–291; S. Smith (1944), 29.
- 54 Another beneficiary of Hystaspes’ reputation may have been his brother Pharnaces, who served as the chief officer of the Persepolis administration for part of Darius I’s reign. It is tempting to identify Pharnaces with Parnakku (the Akkadian rendering of Old Persian **Farnaka*, Greek “Pharnaces”) who played a prominent role in the provincial administration of Babylonia under Cyrus; see Dandamaev (1992), 108–109; Jursa (2011), 434–435.
- 55 See Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 12.43. Briant (2002), 310, seems to treat this passage as factual.
- 56 See Herodotus 1.208.
- 57 Ctesias (*Epitome of Photius* § 23) claims that Darius died at the age of seventy-two, meaning he was thirty-six years old when he became king in 522 BCE and approximately twenty-eight when Cyrus embarked upon his final campaign. This reckoning of Darius’ age seems more compatible with the view that he was a senior officer within Cambyses’ inner circle; see Cook (1983), 55.
- 58 Herodotus 1.136; Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 67.
- 59 See Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Harem, i. In Pre-Islamic Iran.” The first element of Old Persian **manapathni* and Middle Persian *banbishn* derives from Old Iranian **nmana*, “house,” and is the root of Old Persian **banuka*, “aristocratic lady,” attested in Elamite form in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.
- 60 See Herodotus 2.1; Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cassandane.”
- 61 Herzfeld (1947), 83, argues that the recurrence of the name “Amytis” within the Achaemenid family proves the historicity of Cyrus’ Median bride.
- 62 See Malalas 6.7.
- 63 See Herodotus 3.68, 3.88. Brosius (1996), 47–48, 52–53.
- 64 For example, Malalas’ claim that Cyrus perished in battle against the Samian tyrant Polycrates is clearly absurd.
- 65 See Herodotus 3.2–3.3. Dinon also tells of Cyrus’ marriage to this princess; see Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 13.10.
- 66 Herodotus 3.3, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 67 See Herodotus 3.2–3.3. It seems more likely that Cambyses himself spawned these tales to legitimate his own claims to the Egyptian throne; see Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cambyses II.”
- 68 See also Herodotus 1.205.
- 69 Recent analyses of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets do not alter this conclusion. These archives record offerings sanctioned by

- Darius I at Neyriz, beside the tombs of Cambyses II, his wife Phaedime, and a certain Chissandush. Chissandush is believed to have been a member of Cyrus' family; see Henkelman (2003b), 149–150. But there is no reason to suppose that he or she was a child of Cyrus.
- 70 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.6.11, 5.1.2–5.1.18.
- 71 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 5.2.5–5.2.8, 8.4.16, 8.4.24–8.4.27. Sandridge (2012), 29, sees in these and other episodes Cyrus' knack for "matchmaking," a skill highly valued by the Socratic philosophers.
- 72 See Plutarch *Life of Themistocles* 26.5.
- 73 See Wiesehofer (2001), 85. To the extent that early Achaemenid royal women were removed from the public eye, it had to do with the desire of the nobility to be socially exclusive; see Llewellyn-Jones (2013), 104.
- 74 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.58–7.5.65.
- 75 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.65, translated by Miller.
- 76 See Bisutun Inscription § 10.
- 77 See Herodotus 3.27–3.36.
- 78 For example, Herodotus' assertion (3.29) that Cambyses disrespected and killed the sacred Apis bull of Egypt is disproved by Egyptian texts, which state that the bull was born during the twenty-seventh year of Amasis' reign and died naturally during the sixth year of Cambyses. The beautiful sarcophagus that Cambyses commissioned for the dead bull has been found and contains a special dedication from Cambyses himself.
- 79 See Dandamaev (1989), 82, 99–102, 106, and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Cambyses II."
- 80 Plato *Laws* 3.694–3.695.
- 81 See Shahbazi (1970), 412. Shahbazi properly dismisses the testimony of the twelfth-century Byzantine canonist John Zonaras (13.8) that Cambyses had a son named Orontes. For more authoritative classical references to Cambyses' infertility, see Herodotus 3.66; Ctesias *Epitome of Photius* § 14.
- 82 Ctesias *Epitome of Photius* § 8.
- 83 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.11, 8.7.16.
- 84 See Khaleghi-Motlagh (2009–2010), 265.
- 85 See Herodotus 3.30.
- 86 See Herzfeld (1947), 706; Herodotus 4.6, 4.10.
- 87 See *Yasht* 8.6–8.7; Taffazoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Āraš." The common element in the stories of Bardiya and Arash is the use of a bow to demarcate territories under Iranian control (consider the similarity between the ancient form of Arash's name and the

common river name Araxes, often given to streams at the frontier of Iranian lands). As Herzfeld (1947), 717–718, demonstrates, the Turanians occupied the position formerly held by indigenous peoples in the epical tradition, and just as the Persian Empire bordered on Turan to the northeast, so, too, did it border on Ethiopia to the south after 525 BCE. This must have made it easy for the minstrels to transfer the setting of the bow-pulling motif from the empire's northeastern frontier to Africa. See also Kellens (2002), 431.

- 88 See Ctesias *Epitome of Photius* § 8. Sekunda (1992), 3, rejects Ctesias' chronology on the basis of a gem, in the Bibliothèque National in Paris, which shows three armed Persian kings standing side by side. Sekunda concludes that Cyrus ruled his empire as a triarchy toward the end of his reign, with Cambyzes as his viceroy in Babylonia and Bardiya as his viceroy in the east.
- 89 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.11. Herodotus (3.30) corroborates Xenophon, stating that after becoming king Cambyzes dreamt that Bardiya, his presumptive heir, had enthroned himself at Ecbatana. Herzfeld (1947), 50, 205, argues that "Patizeithes," which Herodotus (3.16) gives as the name of the Magian whom Cambyzes left in charge of his household, was, in fact, the title that Bardiya held as Cambyzes' designated successor. Specifically, Herzfeld saw in "Patizeithes" a rendering of Median **pathyazati*, meaning "heir" or "collateral heir." Other scholars have explained "Patizeithes" as Old Persian **pati-khshayathiya* (New Persian *padishah*) – "hegemon," "co-regent," "overlord" – also a fitting title for the next in line for the throne.
- 90 Consider that Teispes may have divided his estate between his two sons, Cyrus I and Ariaramnes, and that Cambyzes I was not the eldest son of Cyrus I; that was Arruku, whom Ashurbanipal had taken hostage to Nineveh. Even Cyrus II's succession to the Persian throne may have been guaranteed by his mother being the daughter of Astyages, and not because he was the eldest son of Cambyzes I. Succession disputes resurfaced two generations after Cyrus, when Darius I had to designate his heir. Darius ultimately selected Xerxes because Xerxes' mother was the daughter of Cyrus, whereas the mother of Artobazanes, Darius' eldest son, was the daughter of a nobleman and not of a king; see Frye (1984), 97; Dandamaev (1989), 107, 180.
- 91 See Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Bardiya."
- 92 See Herzfeld (1947), 202–203. Herzfeld's theory is hardly contradicted by Cambyzes' maintenance of an active estate in the Babylonian city of Sippar during the mid-530s BCE, for Achaemenid grandees often owned and visited properties in different areas of

- the empire. See Bresciani, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. Aršāma, ii.
- 93 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.11; Herodotus 3.30.
- 94 Henkelman (2012), 960, identifies the ruins of Tal-e Zahhak in the Fasa plain, located approximately forty miles southwest of Neyriz, with the site of Paishiyahuvada (perhaps meaning the “Place of the Archives”), known from the Bisutun Inscription and Persepolis Fortification Tablets. Judging by the fact that Gaumata the Magian commenced his rebellion at Paishiyahuvada and that Vahyazdata (the second False Bardiya) raised an army there, one might speculate that Paishiyahuvada served as Cambyses II’s chief residence in Parsa. Assuming this to be the case, we would have to view Darius I’s palace-building at Persepolis within the context of an apparent custom, pursuant to which each of the early Achaemenids developed his own special capital in the Persian homeland. Pasargadae would thus be associated with Cyrus, Paishiyahuvada with Cambyses, and Persepolis with Darius. The foundation of Persepolis would thus provide no indication that Darius wished to distance himself from the line of Cyrus, as is sometimes thought.
- 95 This statement assumes that whoever seized the throne from Cambyses would have followed some of the same policies as the real Bardiya. According to Dandamaev (1989), 109–113, Bardiya supported the Persian and Median common folk, whom he sought to enfranchise by abolishing the rights of the nobility. See also Frye (1984), 99–100.
- 96 There is some dispute as to whether Atossa receives mention in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, as she may or may not be the woman whose name appears in Elamite form in Tablets 162 and 163 as *Udusana*; see Llewellyn-Jones (2013), 113. Her potential absence in these texts certainly does not prove that she was dead when they were composed or that the Greek authors exaggerated her importance, for Xerxes’ name appears only once in Elamite records from Darius’ reign, specifically in the unpublished Persepolis Fortification Tablet 1659.
- 97 See Herodotus 3.68. Brosius (1996), 55–56, views the story of Gaumata taking over Cambyses’ wives with skepticism, given that no other classical author mentions it. The tale certainly smacks of legend; see Appendix III.
- 98 See Herodotus 3.31, 3.88.
- 99 See Shahbazi (1970), 410–414. Incestuous marriages were also common among Elamite royalty.
- 100 See Brosius (1996), 45–46; Wiesehofer (2001), 84; Herzfeld (1947), 86.
- 101 See Herzfeld (1947), 85–86.

- 102 See Herodotus 3.31–3.32; Ctesias *Epitome of Photius* § 14. Ctesias does not explicitly state that Roxana was Cambyses’ sister, although this is usually inferred; see Brosius (1996), 46–47. Herodotus’ assertion that Cambyses killed Roxana is clearly false.
- 103 According to Strabo (17.1.5), the Nubian capital of Meroe derived its name from this princess, but this is pure folklore. Diodorus Siculus (1.33) identifies Meroe as Cambyses’ mother, perhaps in accordance with the tradition that he had been born to an Egyptian princess.
- 104 See Herodotus 3.88.
- 105 See Herodotus 7.69.
- 106 See Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Artystone”; Brosius (1996), 50.
- 107 See Herodotus 3.88.
- 108 See Ctesias *Epitome of Photius* § 8. Ctesias (*Epitome of Photius* § 3) mentions another Median prince who may have benefited from Amytis’ influence. This was Parmises, who served as one of Cyrus’ generals and briefly fell captive during Cyrus’ war with the Sakas. Photius’ identification of Parmises as Amytis’ brother has fostered speculation that he was either an illegitimate son of Astyages or the offspring of Amytis’ mother from a previous marriage; see Diakonoff (1985b), 148. Given Amytis’ unique status, the latter seems more likely, for as the stories of the *Shahnameh* attest, even the children of concubines could inherit the throne if no legitimate sons were alive.
- 109 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 13.
- 110 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.20.
- 111 See Herodotus 1.153; Isaiah 45:14–16.
- 112 See Herodotus 2.163. The archaeological record indicates that Greek and Carian mercenaries first began settling in Egypt in large numbers during the mid-seventh century BCE.
- 113 See Diodorus Siculus 16.48.6–16.48.7.
- 114 See Wallinga (1991).
- 115 See Herodotus 3.39.
- 116 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 1.1.4, 7.4.2, 8.6.8; Herodotus 3.19, 3.34. Thucydides (1.16) indicates that Darius I was the first Persian king to subjugate Cyprus.
- 117 See Herodotus 3.44.
- 118 See Polybius 16.40. Jones (1939), 234–235, provides that Gaza and Ashdod were the only coastal cities in Palestine that the Achaemenids did not entrust to the Phoenicians. This could indicate that these settlements were occupied at a later date than other Levantine cities. Herodotus (3.5) describes Gaza as having

been subject to the king of the Arabs.

119 See Duncker (1882), 90–91, 133, 136.

120 For Cambyses using Gaza as a base of operations, see Maspero (1900), 658.

The Way of the Warrior: Cyrus' Death in Central Asia

- 1 According to the historian Arnold Toynbee (1962b), 7, “steppe-surface and water-surface have this in common, that they are both accessible to Man only as a pilgrim and sojourner. Neither offers him anywhere on its broad expanse (apart from islands and oases) a place where he can rest the sole of his foot and settle down to a sedentary existence. Both offer strikingly greater facilities for travel and transport than those parts of the Earth’s surface upon which human communities are accustomed to live in permanence; but both exact (as the penalty for trespassing upon them) the necessity of constantly ‘moving on’ or else ‘moving off’ their surface altogether and finding some standing ground upon terra firma somewhere beyond the coasts which respectively surround them.”
- 2 See Herodotus 4.62 (translated by de Sélincourt): “Wine is poured over [the victim’s] head, and his throat cut over a bowl. The bowl is then taken to the platform on top of the woodpile, and the blood in it poured out over the sword. While this goes on above, another ceremony is being enacted below, close to the pile: this consists in cutting off the right hands and arms of the prisoners who have been slaughtered, and tossing them into the air . . . The victims’ arms and hands are left to lie where they fall, separate from the trunks.” Boyce (1982), 41, has surmised that the Scythian war god was none other than the Indo-Iranian Indra. The Rig Veda describes this blond-bearded deity as delighting in the tumult of combat and devastating the settlements of foreign tribes, seizing their cattle and slaughtering their men and women without remorse.
- 3 See Herodotus 4.64.
- 4 See Herodotus 4.65. Archaeology has confirmed this detail; see Rolle (1989), 82–83.
- 5 The Latin author Quintus Curtius Rufus (4.6.3) understood this dynamic well: “Of the nations in that part of the world the Bactrians are the most spirited, with a fierce disposition . . . Living not far from the belligerent Scythians, who make their living by looting, they were constantly at war.” Elaborating upon this theme, Toynbee (1962a), 138–139, has posited that having to fend off the nomadic invasions of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE gave the Medes and Persians the necessary military vigor to achieve their sweeping conquests.
- 6 As to the apparent lack of knowledge about Inner Asia, Herzfeld

(1947), 769–770, interprets *Videvdata* 1.19 to show that the Persians believed the remote regions of the steppe to be inhabited by a race of humanoid monsters that lacked heads but had eyes on their chests. The Greeks had a similar belief regarding the inhabitants of Africa; see Herodotus 4.191.

7 See Herodotus 4.1.

8 At least in later times, the steppe nomads used standards in the shapes of dragons, the heads of which were made of metal and the tails of streaming cloth that could be used to determine the direction of the wind (an important piece of information for mounted archers); see Wilcox (1986), 43–44. The use of dragon-banners in earlier times may be surmised from the story related by Herodotus (4.9) that the Scythians claimed descent from a serpentine witch. According to Herodotus, this witch compelled the Scythian “Heracles,” who represented an early forerunner of Ferdowsi’s Rostam, to sleep with her. The use of canine standards or banners may be deduced from the importance of dogs, wolves, and jackals as tribal totems among the steppe folk. Herodotus (4.105) states that the Neuri, a nomadic tribe from southern Russia, believed that they were a race of werewolves, and some scholars have derived the ethnonym “Saka” to mean the “Dogs”; see Frye (1963), 41. This proposed derivation, which recalls the names of certain Turco-Mongolian tribes, has been challenged by some scholars, who prefer to interpret the ethnonym “Saka” to mean “man” or “wanderer”; see Szemerényi (1980), 44–45; Tavernier (2007), 30. However, it seems significant that the land of Hyrcania, which was often occupied by steppe tribes, was called *Varkana*, or “Wolf-Land,” and that the ethnic name of the Turanians may be linked to New Persian *tureh*, or “jackal.” A fifth century BCE Greek bowl-painting depicts a Saka standard-bearer wearing what appears to be a fox-skin over his head, and one wonders whether such outfits gave rise to the folk tradition preserved in the *Shahnameh* and other texts regarding the “dog-” and “wolf-headed” peoples of the steppes. Consider also that the Old Persian calendar, which was perhaps of Median origin, contained a month with the northern Iranian name **Varkazana*, which some have explained to mean the “Month of the Wolf-Man” or “Month of the Werewolf God”; see Kent (1953), 206–207; Areshian (2006).

9 See Herodotus 1.202; Arrian 4.1.1, 4.11.9; Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.6.11; Polybius 10.48.

10 The Apasiacae may be identical to the Pasiani and Attasii of Strabo (11.8.2, 11.8.8); see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Apasiacae.” They were presumably identical to the “Sakas of the Marsh” of Darius I’s Egyptian inscriptions, whereas the Saka

Haumavarga were the “Sakas of the Plain,” referenced in the same text.

- 11 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 7; Strabo 11.8.8. There is some doubt about whether Ctesias or Photius accurately transmitted the name of Cyrus’ enemies, for the *Persica* has the Derbices receive military assistance from the Indians, who allegedly came to their aid with war elephants, which scared off the Persian cavalry. The idea that these beasts could have been used in a battle near the Caspian or Aral Sea is absurd, so it has been suggested that either Ctesias or Photius conflated information about an earlier expedition that Cyrus launched against a tribe with a similar-sounding name: the Dyrbaeans (also known as the Dyrbactae), an obscure people who lived near the mountains of Badakhshan in eastern Bactria; see Vogelsang (1992), 188. Consider also the testimony of Strabo (15.1.6) regarding the Indian tribe of the Hydrakas, who participated in Cyrus’ campaigns in this region.
- 12 See Yablonsky (1990); Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies.” The Saka Tigrakhauda first receive mention in the Bisutun Inscription of Darius I, who proudly memorialized his victory over these nomads in 519 BCE. The association between the Massagetae and the Saka Tigrakhauda seems secure based on Polyaeus’ account (7.11.6, 7.12) of Darius’ campaign against the Central Asian Sakas; see Harmatta (1976), 23–24; Shahbazi (1982); Vogelsang (1992), 131–132. It is significant that Polyaeus identifies one of Darius’ Saka opponents as Thamyris, which represents an alternate rendering of Tomyris, the name of the Massagetan queen who opposes Cyrus in Herodotus’ narrative. Harmatta has even restored the portion of the Bisutun Inscription dealing with the Saka Tigrakhauda to describe the Araxes River as the frontier between the Persian Empire and the territory of these nomads. Changes in the internal composition and power structure of the Saka Tigrakhauda confederation explain the various references to the Massagetae, Derbices, Dahae, and Apa-Sakas as the nomadic enemy against whom Cyrus marched; see Dandamaev (1989), 67.
- 13 See Herodotus 1.216.

- 14 See Herodotus 1.216. According to Herodotus, who presumably obtained his information from an earlier Greek author, the Massagetae did not yet use iron for weapons or armor, when Cyrus marched against them.
- 15 See Herodotus 1.73.
- 16 See Avery (1972).
- 17 Holt (1995), 38, 56, argues that the Massagetae caused trouble in response to Cyrus' construction of fortresses in Transoxiana for purposes of controlling the movement of peoples to and from the steppes.
- 18 Rawlinson (1899), 82–83.
- 19 Herodotus 1.204, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 20 Cambyses' promotion may be deduced from the fact that, beginning in August 530 BCE, he and Cyrus shared the titles "King of Babylon, King of the Lands." Cambyses had never before been recognized as "King of the Lands." See Dandamaev (1989), 70–71; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Cyrus iii. Cyrus II the Great."
- 21 One cannot help but wonder whether Cyrus' was in poor health at this time.
- 22 See Herodotus 1.204–1.214. All quotations from the summary of these chapters in the main text are from the translation of de Sélincourt.
- 23 The thematic elements, which focus on Cyrus' hubris, are attributable to Herodotus, who went out of his way to portray the conqueror's demise in a particular light; see Avery (1972). The fairytale aspects are mostly the work of the Iranian minstrels, who constructed their narratives on archetypal literary frameworks. Tomyris' presence in the tale has been explained by Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1985), 466, on the basis that "fighting a Scythian queen may have formed part of a conventional Iranian repertory of heroic feats, just as fighting against Amazons seems to have been a required task for many Greek heroes." Much the same may be said of the ruse the Persians allegedly employed to destroy Spargapises and his men. The motif of an Iranian king baiting the steppe nomads with wine appears in Herodotus' account of Cyaxares' rise to power, as well as in Strabo's tale of an earlier war between Cyrus and the Sakas; see Bivar (2000), 23. Other details, including the tripartition of the Saka army (which recurs in Polyaeus' account of Darius' war against the Sakas), Cyrus' dream, and maybe even the timing of the conqueror's death three days after crossing the Araxes also belong to the realm of Persian folklore.
- 24 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 7–8.
- 25 For the importance of Amorges, see Vogelsang (1992), 214, 217–

218. For the significance of the Saka Haumavarga in the Achaemenid army, see Herodotus 6.113, 7.96, 9.71.
- 26 See Berossus Fragment 11; Diodorus Siculus 2.44, 11.33.
- 27 See Onesicritus Fragment 10, in Maspero (1900), 621, footnote 2.
- 28 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.2, translated by Miller.
- 29 Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.6–8.7.9, translated by Miller.
- 30 See Dandamaev (1989), 68; Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Cyrus iii, Cyrus II the Great.”
- 31 See Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1985); Gera (1993), 117, drawing a parallel to the final address of Kay Khosrow in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*; De Jong (1997), 440.
- 32 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.28.
- 33 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 9.
- 34 This funeral parade was an old Indo-European custom; see M. West (2007), 502.
- 35 See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 6.29; Strabo 15.3.7; Quintus Curtius Rufus 10.1.31–10.1.32. In the *Alexander Romance*, Cyrus’ coffin is said to have been made of gold intermingled with glass, such that his entire body was visible.
- 36 See Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander* 6.29. Also Strabo 15.3.7. This old Aryan custom is sometimes thought to reveal Cyrus’ special devotion to Mithra; see Soudavar (2003), 88, and (2010), 118; Duchesne-Guillemin (1974), 17. However, ancient Zoroastrians also performed animal sacrifices in honor of their dead, and the custom has been observed among the Zoroastrian communities of India and Iran as recently as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; see Boyce (1982), 71, and (1988), 27; Daryaee (2013). Note also that the veneration of the sun god upon the death of a monarch may have been part of a broader Near Eastern custom going back to Assyrian times; see Llewellyn-Jones (2013), 147. So this does not prove that Cyrus was a Mithraist.
- 37 Wood (1997), 111.
- 38 Stronach (1978), 24–26, implies that the inscription never existed. But Plutarch explicitly states and Strabo implies that Alexander had the inscription re-engraved in Greek characters.
- 39 Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 64.9, adapted from the translation of Dakyns. Arrian (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 6.29) offers a similar reading of the tomb inscription.
- 40 Strabo 15.3.7, translated by Jones.

The Empire after Cyrus

- 1 The Old Persian term *uvamarshiyush amariyata* (“he died his own death”), which Darius uses in the Bisutun Inscription to describe

Cambyse's passing, is of uncertain meaning. It has been explained as "he died of accidental/natural causes" or "he committed suicide." The former usage is perhaps more accurate based on the existence of the related Baluchi term, *wadh way miri* ("self-death"), which means to perish of natural causes; see Frye (1963), 256, endnote 56. M. West (2007), 387, refers to similar idioms for death by natural causes in other Indo-European languages, including Greek, Latin, Ossetic, and Lithuanian.

- 2 See Toynbee (1963a), 599–601. In explaining why Darius' accession motivated opportunistic rabble-rousers and satraps to declare their independence, Toynbee (1963a), 602, states: "Some Persians, as well as most Medes, believed that the murder committed by Darius, if not a previous murder by some other hand, had extinguished the last representative of the houses of Cyrus I and Cyaxares which had been united in the person of Cyrus II and his sons, and that they were now morally free from any obligation to accept Darius' claim to be Cyrus II's legitimate successor. This was why the death of Darius' victim in 522 BCE had the same catastrophic effect as Nero's suicide in 69 CE. The consequent certainty that now, at any rate, no authentic heir of the legitimate dynasty remained alive opened the flood-gates for an outburst of anarchy."
- 3 The practice of wearing Cyrus' robes as part of the coronation ceremony is mentioned by Plutarch (*Life of Artaxerxes* § 3). Cambyse may have instituted the practice with an eye toward Mesopotamian ritual, in which the king's garment often served as an important ceremonial icon; see S. Smith (1944), 155.
- 4 This statement derives from one of Darius' Egyptian inscriptions commemorating the opening of his famous canal; see Hinz (2008–2009), 184.
- 5 This divine epithet of Ahuramazda appears in the Elamite version of the Bisutun Inscription (§ 62–63).
- 6 Descent from Cyrus was the determining factor in Xerxes' appointment as crown prince; see Herodotus 7.2.
- 7 See Thucydides 1.69.5; Burn (1985), 331; Balcer (1989), 143.
- 8 As translated by Kent (1953), 151. Vallat (2010) surmises, based on the Elamite version of the text, that the country in question was the Persian homeland. But the inscription certainly served as a broad edict; see Herzfeld (1947), 395–401. Cook (1983), 69, suspects that Xerxes' proclamation represented the revival of a policy that Darius had implemented in the direct aftermath of the Magian usurpation.
- 9 Herodotus 6.98, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 10 Some scholars have doubted whether this treaty was ever finalized; see Badian, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Callias, Peace of."

- 11 The prince who could have used this treaty to effectively control Greek politics and thus prevent or at least delay the Greek conquest of Persia was Cyrus the Younger, the full brother of Artaxerxes II. Cyrus had possessed a firm understanding of Greek culture and politics since his youth. In 407 BCE, Darius II had made him supreme military commander of all Asia Minor, with express orders to settle the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in favor of Sparta. Perhaps only fifteen or sixteen at the time, Cyrus had financed the reconstruction of the Spartan fleet and had used his influence to secure the appointment of his personal friend Lysander as admiral. It was Lysander's victory at the naval Battle of Aegospotami in 405 BCE that ultimately precipitated Athens' defeat. Cyrus had many admirers among the Greeks, including the historian Xenophon, and was, on the whole, more energetic and resolute than his brother. In 401 BCE, Cyrus revolted against Artaxerxes with the intention of seizing the crown for himself. At the Battle of Cunaxa, fought only a few days' march from Babylon, Cyrus nearly routed the imperial army, but his death in the thick of combat caused his soldiers to abandon the fight. It is suspected that, during his uprising, Cyrus presented himself as the second coming of his more famous namesake, the imperial founder; see page xxxiii. This seems to have led to the conflation of the two princes in the minds of certain historians. Thus, Quintus Curtius Rufus (3.4.1) mistook the garrison left behind by Cyrus the Younger in Cilicia as a bastion constructed by Cyrus the Great during the war against Croesus – Arrian (*The Campaigns of Alexander* 2.4) knew the true history of the military camp. See also Xenophon *Oeconomicus* (4.10–4.11).
- 12 Artaxerxes' endorsement of idolatry probably owed to Babylonian influence (both his parents had been born to Babylonian concubines) and was opposed by certain Iranian groups; see Boyce (1982), 217–218. However, the complete redemption of Mithra and other pagan gods made Artaxerxes a hero among his Iranian subjects, particularly the Medes and other tribes in northern Iran. When the Parthian emperors of the second century BCE wished to legitimize their rule over the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau, they fabricated a genealogy linking themselves to Artaxerxes II; see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Artaxerxes II." This positive legacy reveals the tremendous importance of religion in the day-to-day lives of the ancient Iranians, but in truth, Artaxerxes' religious reforms promoted archaic rites and concepts best left abandoned and signaled a regression of Iranian intellectualism just when Greek philosophy was reaching new heights under Plato and the students of his academy in Athens. Thus Herzfeld (1947), 410, states: "One

needs only to think of any line of a Greek author of that period and to confront it with the poorness of mind which the passion of Mithra [in the *Mihr Yasht*] displays, to understand that the conquest of Iran by Hellenism was unavoidable and imminent.”

- 13 The Greek authors seem to have mistakenly applied the term “eunuch” to a vast array of high-ranking officials within the Persian bureaucracy; see Briant (2002), 275–276. One may well wonder whether the Greeks erred in portraying Bagoas as a gelding. According to Dinon, Bagoas was of Egyptian heritage and harbored a grudge against Artaxerxes III due to the latter’s hash treatment of his fellow countrymen.
- 14 Quintus Curtius Rufus (10.1) relates that Alexander unjustly accused the Persian Orsines of looting Cyrus’ tomb, and Plutarch (*Life of Alexander* § 69) states that the true culprit was a Macedonian named Polymachus.
- 15 See Olmstead (1948), 482, on the Asiatic Greeks flourishing under Persian rule during the fourth century BCE. Also telling as to the apprehension with which the subject nations viewed the fall of the Achaemenid state is the evidence of the Hellenistic Dynastic Prophecy, which relates the Babylonians’ hopes that, in the aftermath of Alexander’s victory at Gaugamela, Darius III would return with an army to drive off the Macedonian invaders (mentioned in the text as “Hannaeans,” an archaic Babylonian term that had come to signify hostile western tribes). Compare to Van Der Spek (2003).

Cyrus’ Legacy

- 1 See Toynbee (1963a), 580.
- 2 This constitutes a central theme of Eduard Meyer’s seminal overview of the Achaemenid Empire (1901), 1–233.
- 3 See Lincoln (2003) and (2007), 54–81.
- 4 See Hodgson (1977), 283–284.

Cyrus, Darius, and the Early History of the Achaemenid Dynasty

- 1 Herodotus 1.125, translated by de Sélincourt.
- 2 Herodotus 3.75.
- 3 This is the translation offered by Kent (1953), 116, which has been followed by other scholars; see Briant (2002), 110–111; Kuhrt (2007a), 177. The inscription almost certainly dates to Darius’ reign; see Hallock (1970), 53, footnote 2. The text is extremely fragmentary and subject to different reconstructions. For example, Hinz has offered the following translation: “Saith Darius, the Great King, son of Hystaspes, the Achaemenid: This palace has King

Cyrus . . . erected for himself and also [this relief], an inscription [however he had not] added. I have written my inscription on it"; see Stronach (1978), 97, footnote 80. But assuming Kent's translation to be correct, CMb would appear to militate against the notion that Darius sought to rewrite the early history of the Achaemenid dynasty. Those who believe that Darius was a liar often claim that he falsely presented Arsames and Ariaramnes as kings instead of Cyrus' ancestors in order to justify his own regal claims. However, Kent's textual reconstruction indicates that Darius recognized Cambyses I, a contemporary of Arsames and Ariaramnes, as a king in Persia.

- 4 Virtually no traces of the Old Persian version of this originally trilingual inscription remain, except for, perhaps, the broken off remains of two signs known as "Pasargadae Fragment Number 5." The Elamite and Akkadian versions are, however, better preserved.
- 5 From the Elamite version of the inscription (§ 70), after Hinz (1974), 133, as reproduced by Vallat (2011), 280.
- 6 From the Old Persian version of the inscription (§ 70), after Schmitt (1991), 73–74, as reproduced by Vallat (2011), 280.
- 7 From the Elamite version of the inscription (§ 70), after Vallat (2011), 280. According to Vallat, Darius here refers to the fact that the Elamite version of the Bisutun Inscription was carved before the Old Persian version.
- 8 From the Elamite version of the inscription (§ 70), after Herrenschmidt (1989), 204–205, as reproduced by Vallat (2011), 280.
- 9 See Nylander (1967).
- 10 See, for example, Stronach (1990), (1997a), (1997b), (1997c), (2000); Stronach and Gopnick, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Pasargadae"; Wiesehofer (2001), 17; Briant (2002), 110–111; Lincoln (2007), 113
- 11 See Hallock (1970).
- 12 See Bahari (2001); Mallowan (1985), 395–396. But see the commentary of Tavernier (2013).
- 13 See Vallat (2011), 278.
- 14 See Frye (1984), 96.
- 15 Thus, among the thirty or so inscriptions of Ashurbanipal translated by Luckenbill (1927), Part 2, only one text mentions that monarch's descent from Sargon II, Ashurbanipal's great-grandfather and the founder of the Sargonid dynasty to which Ashurbanipal belonged. Also, with the exception of Esarhaddon (who does so in only two inscriptions) and Saracus, none of the Sargonid kings includes his clan or dynastic affiliation in his titulary.

- 16 See Zournatzi (2011).
- 17 See Burn (1962), 93; Cook (1983), 50.
- 18 See Herodotus 3.72.
- 19 See the commentary to Herodotus 3.72 in How and Wells (2008).
- 20 The second imposter pretending to be Bardiya was a certain Vahyazdata, who instigated a revolt in the Persian heartland a few months after Darius' accession.
- 21 Yamauchi (1990), 145.
- 22 For recent defenses of Darius' veracity, see Shahbazi, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Darius, iii. Darius I the Great"; S. West (2007); T. C. Young (1988b), 55.
- 23 See Stronach (2003b), 156–157.
- 24 Herodotus (4.43) states that Xerxes I had a cousin named Sataspes, an Achaemenid, who was the son of a certain Teaspes. This Teaspes may be identical to the Teaspis, whom Herodotus (7.79) identifies as the father of one Xerxes' officers. Diodorus (19.48.5) mentions a "chief among the Persians" named Thespias, who lived during the late fourth century BCE. "Teaspes," "Teaspis," and "Thespias" have all been identified as variant Greek rendering of "Teispes"; see Herzfeld (1947), 91; Armayor (1978), 150.
- 25 Consider that Herodotus never calls Mardonius, whose mother was Darius' sister, an Achaemenid.
- 26 Thus, on his deathbed, Cyrus II made his eldest son Cambyses II the supreme ruler of the empire and the younger Bardiya the viceroy of Media or Bactria; see Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.7.11; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 8. Similarly, Darius I gave Xerxes the crown, but made his other son, Ariamenes, a close second as the satrap of Bactria; see Plutarch *Brotherly Love* 488. And Darius II appointed his eldest son Artaxerxes II as his heir, while making Cyrus the Younger the *karanos*, or supreme military commander, of all Asia Minor. Note that in each instance the division of power was uneven, with one brother having to serve the other. Similar practices are attested in the administration of the Elamite kingdom during the seventh century BCE; see Henkelman (2008a), 12–13.
- 27 Indeed, one may wonder whether Teispes' possible oversight of Ariaramnes could have motivated Darius to emphasize his genealogy from the more remote Achaemenes.
- 28 Balcer (1984), 115, and (1994), 261, situates them in southeastern Fars and Kerman. Frye (1984), 89, suspects that they ruled in western Fars.
- 29 Vallat (2011).
- 30 Herodotus 7.11, translated by de Sélincourt.

31 See Eilers (1974), 3, 9; Cook (1983), 10.

32 See Kent (1953), 158-159.

33 See Frye (1984), 97.

34 See Harmatta (1971a), 6.

Titles and Name of Cyrus

1 See, for example, Waters (2004); Potts (2005) and (2011); Kuhrt (2007a), 48; Alvarez-Mon (2009); Root (2011); Stronach (1997a), (1997b), (2000), 682–685, (2003b), and (2003c); Stronach and Gopnik, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Pasargadae.”

2 Garrison (2011) confirms the attribution of this seal to Cyrus I.

3 See Zournatzi (2011). Consider also that Darius I was willing to subdue his Iranian heritage in his Babylonian inscriptions. Thus, the Akkadian version of the Bisutun Inscription discovered in Babylon invokes Marduk wherever the original version invokes Ahuramazda. Moreover, the Akkadian version of Darius’ tomb inscription fails to state, as do the Persian and Elamite versions, that Darius was “an Aryan of Aryan lineage”; see Sayce (1926), 572.

4 See Olmstead (1948), 214.

5 See, for example, Andreas (1904), 93–94, who based his entire argument on the mistaken identification, spawned from a faulty reading of the cuneiform script, that the Elamites referred to themselves as the *Hapirtu*, an ethnonym that Andreas tried to link to the name of the Mardians; Stronach (1997a), 38; Kellens (2002), 419–429; Henkelman (2003a), 194–196; Potts (2005); Kuhrt (2007a), 48; Tavernier (2007), 528–530.

6 The crux of the argument for “Cyrus” being an Elamite name involves the fact that Mesopotamian and Elamite scribes always rendered it as *Kurash* rather than *Kurush*. Whereas *-ash* endings were foreign to Old Persian, the Elamite language included words that ended in *-ush*. The argument has therefore been made that *Kurash* was the original form, to which the Elamites and Mesopotamians faithfully adhered, whereas the Persians distorted the name to *Kurush*, which would have been easier for Iranians to pronounce. However, at least regarding the Mesopotamian renderings of the name, the discrepancy may be explained on the basis that only the second *u* in *Kurush* was short and that the Assyrian language had no method of transcribing a two-syllable name in which a short *u* followed a long one; see Herzfeld (1947), 91. *Kurash* may therefore represent an accurate Assyrian rendering of Old Persian *Kurush*, which Babylonian and, possibly, Elamite scribes followed. Indeed, the existence of a separate Elamite name *Kurash* is speculative at best. The name is directly attested in only

one Elamite text unrelated to Cyrus the Great or his forebears, and that text belongs to the Susa Acropolis archive, which has been dated to the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. Because many Iranians are named in this archive, the appearance of *Kurash* hardly demonstrates an Elamite origin. A name *Kurashu* occurs in a Babylonian promissory note dated to 541–540 BCE, but the pertinent individual was almost certainly an Iranian, to judge from the name of his son, rendered as Mardu in Akkadian (reflecting Old Iranian **Mardva*, “soft, mild”); see Dandamaev (1992), 95, 98. It is true that a Sumerian record of the Ur III period (late third millennium BCE) appears to document the existence of the personal name *Kurash* before the Iranians migrated to the Near East, but this single occurrence removes us considerably both spatially and temporally from sixth century BCE Persia. There are many random similarities between the names of persons and gods across different cultures and times, and one must avoid placing too much faith in what could be purely coincidental resemblances. Consider the unrelated parallel between the name “Ashur” (sometimes rendered “Assur”), the chief god of the Assyrian pantheon, and the Indian divine epithet “Asura,” cognate of Iranian “Ahura,” as in Ahuramazda’s name. Even if one could prove the existence of an Elamite *Kurash*, independent of Old Persian *Kurush*, it is not far-fetched to think that Cyrus himself would have insisted that his Elamite and Babylonian scribes transmit his name somewhat inexactly as *Kurash*, if the latter name had a positive etymology consistent with the ideology of his rule. In this connection, it is important to consider the postulated meaning of Elamite *Kurash* as “He who Bestows Care” or “He Who Bestows Fortune.” Zadok (1991), 237, actually proposes such an assimilation. Finally, there exists an important contradiction in the arguments of those scholars who have alleged that Cyrus was ethnically Elamite that militates against an Elamite characterization of the conqueror’s name. Most if not all the scholars who have argued for such a characterization have also taken the position that the conqueror carried only Anshanite titulature. To this end, many of these scholars have attempted to disassociate *Kurash* of Parsumash from Cyrus I of Anshan, on the purely speculative basis that the former was the ruler of Parsua in the central Zagros, relatively removed from the Elamite sphere of influence, whereas the latter was the king of an important region in central Fars; see, for example, Potts (2005), 19–21; Kuhrt (2007a), 54. In so doing, these scholars have overlooked the simple rebuttal that, were Parsumash a distinctly non-Elamite country, then no sound reason exists for thinking that its ruler, *Kurash*, carried an Elamite name. It is accordingly

important to remember that Kurash of Parsumash gave his eldest son a decidedly Iranian name – *Aryauka* (Assyrian *Arukku*), the first element of which is *Ariya* or “Aryan”; see Dandamaev, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Arukku.”

- 7 See, for example, Strabo 11.4.2, 11.4.5, 11.14.4. The Kurus are referenced indirectly in the Rig Veda and appear, along with the Kambojas, in the Indian Mahabharatas. Harmatta (1994a), 401–404, has identified the language of the Kambojas as Avestan based on the testimony of the fourth century BCE Indian grammarian Yaska. Their Iranian heritage is also discernible from their purity rites, which, as described in Buddhist literature, were identical to those observed by the Magi and set forth in the *Videvdatta*; see Boyce and Grenet (1991), 129–131. Ptolemy (6.11.6) refers to the Kambojas as “Tambyzoi” (possibly a scribal error for “Kambyzoi”) and situates them in Bactria, near Kabul. Toynbee (1963a), 652–654, and Eilers (1974), 9, locate a group of the Kurus near the Jaxartes River and identify them with the Ottorocorae (or Attacori) of the classical authors; these tribesmen appear in Hindu scriptures as the *Uttara Kuru*.
- 8 See Toynbee (1963a), 652–654; Prakesh (1964). It is tempting to suppose that clans of the Kurus and Kambojas formed part of the Panthialaei tribe, which was likely of eastern Iranian origins. Herzfeld (1947), 91–92, proposes a different scenario for interactions between the Anshanite kings and the Kurus and Kambojas. According to him, Cyrus I and Cambyses I received their names as honorifics while campaigning in eastern Afghanistan against the Kurus and Kambojas on behalf of the Medes. Herzfeld thus categorizes the Persian names “Cyrus” and “Cambyses” in the same genre as the later Latin names “Britannicus” and “Germanicus.” This theory is difficult to accept, however, because Median political power is unlikely to have extended that far to the east. According to Bivar (1988b), 199, the Kambojas were Persian colonists settled in eastern Iran by Cambyses II, but there is no evidence to support this notion.
- 9 For Abaev’s Iranian etymology of “Cyrus” meaning “child” or “hero,” see Dandamaev (1989), 10, footnote 1. For an Old Iranian etymology meaning “(youngest) son,” akin to New Persian and Kurdish *kor*, see Harmatta (1971a), 4–8; Szemerényi (1977). Several Iranian patronyms connote junior birth. The Avesta mentions heroes with the patronyms *Paradata* (New Persian *Pishdadian*) and *Noatarya* (New Persian *Nozaran*). The former patronym is identical to Scythian **Para-lata*, which, according to Herodotus (4.5–4.6), was the family name of the Royal Scythians. Other Iranian etymologies for Cyrus’ name have been proposed.

Eilers (1974) derives Cyrus' name from an Indo-Iranian stem **kuru* meaning "blind." This etymology relates to the tribal Kurus, insofar as their ruler in the Mahabharatas is a blind man (Eilers recognizes in this legend the same Indo-European motif featured in the stories of Oedipus and King Lear). Hoffman explained "Cyrus" to mean "He who humiliates the enemy in verbal contest"; see Schmitt, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Cyrus, i. The Name." Ostensibly citing Ctesias, Plutarch (*Life of Artaxerxes* § 1) states that "Cyrus" meant "sun" in Old Persian; here, we probably have a case of folk etymology based on the phonetic similarity between the first element of Cyrus' name and Old Iranian **hvar*, perhaps already pronounced as *khurra* in the fourth century BCE. But Justi (1925), footnote 1, posits a connection between Old Persian *Kurush* and Norse *hyr*, meaning "fire." Consider also the interpretation by Alekseev (2000), 42, of the Scythian name transmitted by Herodotus as Colaxais; Alekseev derives this name to mean the sun-king" (Scythian **Kola-khsaya*). The initial element **Kola* has been compared to Cyrus' name; see Harmatta (1971a), 6, who nevertheless explains "Coloxais" as the "young king."

10 See Frye (1963), 83; Harmatta (1971a), 4–8; Tavernier (2007), 18–19.

11 See Harmatta (1971a), 4–8; also Tavernier (2007), 519; Herzfeld (1947), 91.

12 See page 377 and Appendix XVII.

13 See Harmatta (1971a).

14 For possible evidence of Cyrus describing his ethnicity in similar terms, see Herzfeld (1947), 91.

15 Henkelman (2003a), 195–196, treats Strabo's statement (15.3.6) that the Persian conqueror was named Agradatus at birth and later adopted the name of the Cyrus River as evidence that "Cyrus" is an Elamite throne-name. This reads too much into the text, as the name "Agradatus" represents an alternate rendering of Iranian Atradates or Aghraeratha; see Herzfeld (1947), 823–824. Potts (2005) interprets the Ctesian legend that Cyrus was the son of a Mardian tribesman named Atradates as an ancient reminiscence of Cyrus' non-Iranian heritage (Potts assumes that the Mardians were non-Iranians). But his interpretation overlooks the well-founded theory of Drews (1974) that the Ctesian legend was partly modeled after the earlier Sargon legend, which required its hero to descend from wild mountain tribesmen. Potts' interpretation is also undermined by the fact that "Atradates" is an Iranian name.

16 See Herodotus 3.89; Quintus Curtius Rufus 4.14.24, translated by Yardley.

17 See Herodotus 3.160.

Additional Thoughts on the Median Worship of Mithra

- 1 See Widengren (1966), 435–436, and (1980), 647–648, 665–666; Duchesne-Guillemin (1974); Bivar (1975a), (1975b), (1998), and (2005); Soudavar (2003), 84, 87–88; (2010), and (2012); Vallat (2010); Frye (2003), 113, and (2010).
- 2 See Tavernier (2007), 559; Kent (1953), 9–10.
- 3 See Bivar (2005), 343. The sole classical reference to Mithra that uses the Old Persian form of the god's name occurs in Plutarch's *A Discourse to an Unlearned Prince* (3.780c), where reference is made to the Persian god "Mesoromasdes." This divine name represents a *dvandva* compound, in which the first element reflects Old Persian **Missa* (Mithra) and the second element "Ahuramazda." Plutarch's Mesoromasdes is thus equivalent to the Avestan *dvandva* "Mithra-Ahura" and parallels the Vedic "Mitra-Varuna."
- 4 See Artaxerxes II, Hamadan, Inscription b.
- 5 For the Median rebellion preceding Artaxerxes II's accession, see Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.2.19. That Artaxerxes II was mindful to support the cults of local Iranian gods is implied by Kuhrt (2007a), 555, who speculates that this king invoked Anahita in his inscriptions at Susa, because Anahita was particularly popular in Elam.
- 6 See Herodotus 1.96–101; Bivar (1998), 29–30; Panaino (2003).
- 7 In his Bisutun Inscription, Darius (§ 68) enumerates his six followers as Vindafarnah, Otanes, Gobryas, Hydarnes, Megabyzus, and Ardomanes. However, Herodotus mentions a certain Aspathines instead of Ardomanes, and Aspathines' involvement seems likely, given that Darius took pains to identify his portrait at Naqsh-e Rostam. According to Aeschylus (*The Persians* 775–776), Darius' brother Artaphernes, the later satrap of Lydia, also took part in the plot.
- 8 See Boyce (1982), 91–94.
- 9 *Yasht* 10.115. To this day, Iranian Zoroastrians hail Mithra as the *Iran-Davar*, "Judge of Iran"; see Boyce (1969), 28.
- 10 *Yasht* 10.7.
- 11 *Yasht* 10.109, translated by Darmesteter (1883).
- 12 *Yasht* 10.7, 10.46, 10.61, translated by Darmesteter (1883).
- 13 See *Yasht* 10.50.
- 14 See *Yasht* 10.30, translated by Darmesteter (1883).
- 15 Thus, the satraps of Media, Cappadocia, and Armenia reportedly sent 3,000, 1,500, and 20,000 Nisayan foals, respectively, to the Persian king on the Mithrakana; see Strabo 11.13.8, 11.14.9; Xenophon *Anabasis* 4.5.24, 4.5.35. Widengren (1966) and (1980)

- has further drawn attention to northern Azerbaijan, where the Magi had also settled, as an important center of Iranian Mithraism.
- 16 See Herzfeld (1968), 13; *Yasht* 10.50; Artaxerxes III, Persepolis, Inscription a.
 - 17 I am thoroughly convinced by the argument of Sims-Williams (1991), who, in my opinion, addresses all the objections raised by Henning (1965) and Boyce (1982), 15-17, 139-140, 250, 283, and (1990). Kellens (1976) arrives at the same conclusion regarding the Mithraic bent of the calendar through a somewhat different analysis.
 - 18 See Duchesne-Guillemin (1974); Vallat (2013). However, these authors, who totally ignore the evidence of Second Isaiah, argue that Cyrus was a Mithraist and that Darius was the first Achaemenid emperor to adopt Zoroastrianism.
 - 19 *Yasht* 10.104–105, adapted from the translations of Herzfeld (1947), 448, and Malandra (1983), 71.
 - 20 See Herzfeld (1947), 450. Briant (2002), 180, and other authors discuss the same passage without identifying the western stream as the Tigris.
 - 21 See Boyce (1982), 28–29.
 - 22 See Duleba (1995), 46.
 - 23 See Boyce (1982), 37–38, 150–152.
 - 24 See Biruni, *The Chronicles of Ancient Nations*, translated by Sachau (1879), 207.
 - 25 Soudavar has explored the religious implications of the solar emblem, stressing that it was added to the frieze as an *afterthought*; see Soudavar (2003), 10, and (2010), 119–120, 124.
 - 26 See Herodotus 1.98.
 - 27 Polybius 10.27.1–13.
 - 28 Regarding the Babylonian cult of the planets and its influence on Iranian religion and Mithraism in particular, see Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 191; Herzfeld (1947), 806–807; Schwartz (1975), 417, footnote 43 and (1985b), 692 (noting a possible link between the legendary description of Ecbatana and the Roman Mithraic “ladder of seven gates”); Bivar (1998) and (2000). For the Roman Mithraic scheme of planetary and metallic grades, see Widengren (1966), 449, footnote 124. Duncker (1881), 314–315, footnote 2, interprets the motif of Deioces’ citadel in a strictly Iranian light and expressly dismisses the notion of any Babylonian influence. In Manichaean literature, four of the five planets are identified as emanations of the “Living Spirit,” perhaps synonymous with Mithra, as the “Lord-of-the-House God,” the “Lord-of-the-Clan God,” the “Lord-of-the-Tribe God,” and the “Lord-of-the-Country God.” These titles recall

- Mithra's status as the divine patron of the different sociopolitical units within Iranian society, as alluded to in the legend of Deioces' rise to power.
- 29 See Zaehner (1955), 144–145; Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 170–171; Gnoli, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Babylonia, ii. Babylonian Influences on Iran.”
 - 30 See Lurje, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Kangdez.” Consider also that residence. Residence in an impregnable fortress was a typical trait of legendary villains whose characters evolved from those of mythical dragons, which were famous for their impenetrable scales; see Skjaervo, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Aždahā. i. In Old and Middle Iranian.” Consistent with this generalization, Holland (2005), 7, interprets Herodotus' account of Deioces' fortifications to reflect bitterness on the part of the Median clan chiefs at the consolidation of royal power at Ecbatana.
 - 31 See Moulton (1913), 128; Bivar (1975a), (1975b), (1988); Schwartz (2010).
 - 32 For the location of Kishessim, see Radner (2013).
 - 33 See Bivar (1998), 46.
 - 34 See Russell (1987), 44
 - 35 Zaehner (1961), 126–144, 139–140, characterizes Yima as Mithra's twin and a possible forerunner of Angra Mainyu, whereas MacKenzie (1913), 67, identifies him as an earthly form of Mithra.
 - 36 See Bivar (1975), (1998).
 - 37 See Handley-Schachler (1998), 199–204; Skjaervo (2013).
 - 38 See Bivar (1975a), (1975b), (1998). Also Zaehner (1955). This view is not outlandish within the context of old Iranian religions. Consider the strong connection between Zurvan and Vayu (the deity of wind and ether), who was also recognized as having positive and negative attributes; see Duchesne-Guillemin (1973), 132–133.
 - 39 See Bivar (1975b), 285. Consider also that ancient Persian armies contained a sacred “Mithraic” herd of 360 white horses, one for each day of the year (according to the ancient Iranian calendar); see Herodotus 1.189–190, 3.90; How and Wells (2008).
 - 40 See Herodotus 1.139.
 - 41 In the Avesta, martial gods such as Mithra, Rashnu, and Verethragna inflict disease and death upon their enemies, even though Angra Mainyu remains the ultimate creator of these misfortunes, but Ahuramazda never punishes his adversaries in this manner; see Forrest and Skaervo (2011), 49. But see *Yasht* 10.110.
 - 42 See Soudavar (2012). Windfuhr (2006) has recently made a convincing argument based on passages in the *Mihr Yasht* and other

- evidence that the pre-Zoroastrian Mithra fulfilled an important function as the “lord of time.”
- 43 Schwartz (2010) denies a Mithraic connection to Nergal’s incorporation into the Median pantheon. He does so based on the assumption that Apollo syncretic identification with Mithra occurred only in post-Achaemenid times. This notion is mistaken, as Herodotus (4.59) seems to have had Mithra in mind in speaking of the Scythian Apollo, whose nickname *Goitosyrus*, “With Strong Pastures,” recalls the Mithraic title “Lord of Wide Pastures.” Equally presumptuous is Schwartz’s theory that the cult epithet *Khshathrapati* had nothing to do with Mithra but, rather, reflected a direct translation of Nergal’s name, which meant “Lord of the City (of the Dead)” in Babylonian. To support this interpretation, Schwartz cites the later meaning of Old Iranian *khshathra* as “city.” However, all attested Achaemenid uses of the word connote “kingdom, empire” or “kingly command.”
 - 44 See Schwartz (2010), 149. Consider also that the personal name “Khshathrita,” borne by the first great political leader of the Medes, may reflect a retrenchment of *Khshathrapati*.
 - 45 See Bivar (1998), 12; Balcer (1984), 318. Compare to Keen (1998), 61–66.
 - 46 See Herodotus 7.114.
 - 47 Bivar (1975a), 104, and (1975b), 287.
 - 48 Rawlinson (1885), Volume 2, 422, 426–427.
 - 49 See Herodotus 1.140, 3.14, 6.9. Live burial is also mentioned as a form of corporeal punishment in the *Persica* (Epitome of Photius § 44, 56, and, perhaps, 50 and 52).
 - 50 Herodotus 3.35.
 - 51 See Justin 19.1.10–19.1.13.
 - 52 See Diogenes Laertius 1.6.
 - 53 See Herodotus 7.114.
 - 54 Schwartz (1985b), 692. The seven stages to the underworld would thus mirror the seven stages to heaven, exemplified in the legend of Ecbatana’s fortifications
 - 55 Herodotus 9.107–9.113.
 - 56 Thus Green (1966), 88, who typically lambastes Xerxes, characterizes the tale of his and Amestris’ practice of human sacrifice as fraudulent wartime propaganda.
 - 57 Vidal (1981), 16–17. The Magian superstition against the contamination of earth with rotting flesh also militates against their performance of live inhumation.
 - 58 See Boyce (1982), 167–168.
 - 59 Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 4.66–4.67.

- 60 Consider also case of Pythius' eldest son, whom, according to Herodotus (7.39), Xerxes put to death for attempting to shirk military service before the expedition against Greece. A number of scholars have interpreted this execution as a sacrifice; see Briant (2002), 243.
- 61 See, for example, Herodotus 7.80.
- 62 See Plutarch *Life of Themistocles* § 13; Justin 19.1.10; Herodotus 3.11, 4.62.
- 63 See Stronach (1985a), 836.
- 64 See Bivar (2005), 342; Stronach and Roaf (2007), 168.
- 65 See Plutarch's *Of Isis and Osiris* (46–47).
- 66 See Bivar (1998), 81; Schwartz (1975), 416, footnote 38; Zaehner (1961), 129–130.
- 67 See Brown (1990), 73.
- 68 See Herodotus 1.98.
- 69 See Stronach and Roaf (2007), 210–213.
- 70 The Akkadian version of the Bisutun Inscription renders the term *ayadana*, the “places of worship” that Darius I rebuilt, as “houses of the gods”; this is the generic Babylonian term for “temple.” Some scholars have cited the use of this term as evidence that the early Achaemenids also worshipped within enclosed temples. But see the compelling arguments of Boyce (1982), 89, and Stronach (1985c), 622.
- 71 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 13; Herzfeld (1947), 206–207. One might also point to Ctesias' tale that the Magian killed Bardiya by forcing him to drink bull's blood. Because the wine consumed during Mithraic ceremonies symbolized the blood of the sacrificed bull, this tale may also be interpreted as evidence of Gaumata's Mithraism.
- 72 See *Yasht* 9.14, 19.37; Bivar (1988a), 516–517, and (2002), 22; Shayegan (2012).
- 73 See Bivar (1988a) and (2002); Duleba (1995), 46–48. In the *Shahnameh*, Azhi Dahaka's Mithraic ties are manifest in the statement that Mehrab, the ruler of Kabul whose name is clearly derived from Mithra, was descended from Zahhak (Azhi Dahaka).
- 74 See Herodotus 3.79; Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 18.
- 75 See Koch (1995); Skjaervo (2013).
- 76 See Schwartz (2010), 146; Tavernier (2007), 98.
- 77 See Henkelman (2011b), 108, footnote 53. Regarding a possible “Zoroastrianized “ version of the festival, see endnote 14 on page 640.
- 78 On the equivocal nature of the archaeological evidence concerning the consumption of *haoma* at Persepolis, see Cameron (1948), 8.

Polyaenus (7.11.12) refers to Darius once praying to “Apollo” to provide rain for the salvation of his army. However, this legend seems to have originated long after Darius lived, and although references to the Iranian worship of Apollo in Greek literature usually pertain to Mithra, the allusion here is probably to the storm god Tishtrya; see Briant (2002), 239.

79 Herodotus 7.40, translated by Macaulay.

80 Consider the statement of Plato (*Alcibiades I* 121) that, during the reign of this king, Persian princes were entrusted to the Magi to learn the philosophy of kingship and the “Magian lore of Zoroaster.” Xanthus of Lydia, a contemporary of Artaxerxes I, also knew Zoroaster to have been a Magian.

81 See Artaxerxes II, Hamadan, Inscription b and Susa, Inscriptions a, d. It is perhaps significant that Artaxerxes II consistently refers to Mithra as *Mithra* or *Mitra* and never uses the Old Persian form of his name, which was **Missa*.

82 See Artaxerxes II, Susa, Inscription a; Bianchi (1978), 45.

83 See Boyce (1982), 185. Consider also that the generic name for a pagan temple in ancient Armenian, a land subject to heavy Median influence, was *Mehean*, ostensibly derived from **Mithradana*; see Gershevitch (1975), 357.

84 See Artaxerxes III, Persepolis, Inscription a.

85 For the Mithraic character of Artaxerxes’ nickname, see Herzfeld (1947), 463.

86 See Arjomand (1998), who, however, ignores the likely assimilation of Artaxerxes III.

87 Arjomand (1998) has argued that **Vahumanah* was the true nickname of Artaxerxes II, which the Greek historians transmitted as *Mnemon*, meaning the “Mindful.” But this seems unlikely, for the information presented by the fifth century CE Greek grammarian Hesychius of Alexandria suggests that Artaxerxes II’s real Iranian epithet was *Abiyataka*, “He Who Remembers”; see Sekunda (1983), 75.

88 See Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 23, 26. Plutarch presents the principal object of Artaxerxes’ desire as his daughter Atossa. That the Magi confused the names “Atossa” and “Homay” (derived from Avestan *Humaya*, “Beneficial, Wholesome”) is understandable, for, in the Avesta, Kavi Vishtaspa has a wife named Atossa and a daughter named Homay. The Magi may also have been led astray by the apparent recurrence of the two names during the Achaemenid period. Specifically, Cyrus II had a Median wife called Amytis (Old Persian **Humati*, “Having Good Thought”), later or variant forms of whose name may have sounded similar to Homay.

Both Amytis and her daughter Atossa played an important role in early Achaemenid history by legitimizing the claims of various Persian emperors to the Median throne.

Cyrus and the Cult of the Goddess Anahita

- 1 See Malandra (1983), 118–120; Boyce, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Anāhīd.”
- 2 See Tacitus *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 3.6.
- 3 See Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 2.
- 4 See Strabo 11.8.4–5. According to Strabo, these temples also contained dedications to other gods, whose identities demonstrate the Zoroastrian beliefs of the cult-founder: Omanus (*Vohu Manah*, “Good Thought,” the Zoroastrian Amesha Spenta) and Anadatus (from Old Iranian **Ana-data*, the “uncreated,” presumably a title of Ahuramazda).
- 5 Berossus Fragment 12.
- 6 *Yasht* 5.126–128. For this passage referring to a cult-statue, see Boyce, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Anāhīd, i. Ardwī Sūr Anāhīd.”
- 7 See Herodotus 7.43.
- 8 See Herodotus 7.191–7.192.
- 9 See Bivar (1975a), 287.
- 10 See Herodotus 1.131.
- 11 See Boyce, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Anāhīd, i. Ardwī Sūr Anāhīd.”
- 12 For Anahita’s greater popularity among the Medes than the Persians, see Frye (2003), 113, and (2010), 19; Soudavar (2010), 118–119, 132. Just as the Median Mithra seems to have carried the title *Khshathrapati* (“Lord of the Empire”), so, too, was Anahita venerated, at least in later times, as *Shahrbanu* (“Lady of the Empire”). Mithra’s close association with Anahita presumably derived from the ancient Iranian belief that the inhabitable earth was surrounded on all sides, as well as below, by an ocean. Each night, the sun set into its western waters, only to pass beneath the earth and rise in the east on the following morning. Because Mithra did not accompany the sun during its aquatic journey, another god was necessary to look after the sun at night. In Indo-Iranian times, this caretaker was Varuna, and in the pagan religion of pre-Zoroastrian Iran, it was Apam Napat (the “Scion of the Waters,” whose name is a cognate of Latin “Neptune”). Anahita eventually supplanted Apam Napat in this role. Moreover, like Mithra, Anahita seems to have been venerated with morbid rites. According to the *Aban Yasht* (94), the “Daiva-worshipping Liars” honored her with nocturnal libations, and this taboo, non-Zoroastrian ritual may be alluded to in the *Videvdā* (7.79).

- 13 See Malandra (1983), 119. Also De Jong (1997), 104–105.
- 14 For the celebration of Sacaea in connection with Anahita's cult, see Strabo 11.8.4–11.8.5. Among the trophies dedicated to the temple of Anahita in Estakhr were the heads of Artabanus V, the last Parthian king, and his commanders and the stuffed hide of the Roman emperor Valerian, who died in captivity after falling prisoner to Shapur I in 260 CE.
- 15 For the Scythians practice of collecting skulls and hides, see Herodotus 4.64. The role of the steppe nomads in the rise of the Median state is described at length by Vogelsang (1992). For possible additional links to the steppe nomads, consider Herodotus' mention of: (1) beavers among the Scythians (4.109); (2) the Scythians' veneration of a female goddess called Argimpasa (4.59), the first element of whose name may be linked to Anahita's epithet "Ardvi"; and (3) the Scythian myth of the Amazons (4.110–4.117), whose martial traits recall those of Anahita. Rostovtzeff (1922), 104, has even identified Anahita on various Scythian artifacts.
- 16 See Stronach and Gopnick, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Pasargadae." Henkelman (2011b), 148, has speculated that the reference in an unpublished Persepolis Fortification Tablet to "female servants of the Pasargadae-people" may pertain to priestesses of Anahita, but there is no clear evidence to suggest that the female servants were engaged in cultic activity, much less the worship of Anahita.
- 17 Devotion to Anahita may also explain Cyrus' support for the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. See page 289.
- 18 See Hinz (2008–2009), 132, 221–222.

Ugbaru, Oebaras, Gobryas, and the Land of Gutium

- 1 See Diakonoff (1985b), 144.
- 2 See S. Smith (1944), 47; Cook (1983), 30; Dandamaev (1992), 72.
- 3 See Beaulieu (1989), 228–229.
- 4 See Zadok (1981).
- 5 See Herzfeld (1968), 30.
- 6 See Berossus Fragment 5.
- 7 See Tavernier (2007), 17, 57.
- 8 This is the meaning given in the legendary account of Nicholas of Damascus (*Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (13)) and endorsed by Herzfeld (1968), 289. L'Enfant (2004), 97, footnote 391, derives the name from Old Persian **Huparush*, meaning "With Good Shoulders." It is possible that the minstrels assimilated the genuine name **Huparush* to **Hubara* to enhance the thrust of their narrative, in which Oebaras acts very much as Cyrus' evangelist. I would contend that the (popular) etymology of Oebaras' name, as well as his high standing among the early Achaemenids,

- contributed to the preservation of his memory as the stereotypical “king-maker” in early Persian folk history. Consider Herodotus’ fanciful tale of Darius’ accession (3.85–86), in which the son of Hystaspes attains the throne by virtue of Oebaras’ cunning.
- 9 See Gershevitch (1969), 240, 242–243. Compare to Tavernier (2007), who tends to associate Elamite transliterations beginning with *uk-* or *u-ik-* with Iranian names beginning with *upa-*.
 - 10 The theory of S. Parpola (2003), 344–345, that the Iranian name “Gobryas” had special meaning among the Babylonians and was adopted by successive governors of the province (first Ugbaru and then Gubaru) stretches the imagination.
 - 11 See Fried (2004), 31–32. Some scholars believe that Gubaru became satrap of Babylonia only in 535 BCE, for that is the first year for which we have business documents invoking his authority as satrap; see Dandamaev (1984), 41; Tuplin (1987a), 114; Briant (2002), 64. However, only four such documents exist from that year, and given the thousands of documents that have survived from the period, the difference between four tablets and none is statistically insignificant.
 - 12 See page 195.
 - 13 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.24–7.5.30.
 - 14 See Hinz (2008–2009), 103–104, characterizing Gobryas as a Sagartian.
 - 15 See Scheil (1914), which has been endorsed by Olmstead (1948), 45, and Burn (1962), 48.
 - 16 Henkelman (2003c), 258.
 - 17 See Olmstead (1948), 45, 56.

The Babylonian Chronicle

- 1 See Kuhrt (1988), 112, who emphasizes the Babylonian Chronicle’s reliability as a source. However, Zawadski (2010) has recently challenged this view by arguing that the Babylonian Chronicle’s mention of Cyrus’ activities betrays the text to be propaganda, a political pamphlet presenting opinions from circles hostile to Nabonidus. However, I find his argument unconvincing, as the Chronicle treats both Cyrus and Nabonidus with a degree of detachment, which one would not expect from a polemical text; see Van Der Spek (2013), 26, footnote 142.
- 2 See Glassner (2004), 230–239.
- 3 This poorly preserved entry recounts Nabonidus’ conquests in Syria, Palestine, and Arabia.
- 4 Not all scholars accept that this entry pertains to 550–549 BCE. According to Drews (1969), the reference could be to events that transpired as early as 554–553 BCE.

- 5 These lines concerning the Persian conquest of Media have been adapted from the translation of Kuhrt (2007a), 50.
- 6 According to Von Voigtlander (1963), 194, this fragmentary sentence recounts the Persian seizure of a fortress or settlement in Babylonian hands, which conquest precipitated the fallout between Cyrus and Nabonidus. This reading is hardly certain, however.
- 7 Some scholars have suspected that the scribes who composed the Babylonian Chronicle purposefully left the entry for this year blank to suppress reference to a defeat suffered by Cyrus; see Beaulieu (1989), 199.
- 8 Contrary to what is sometimes stated, this entry does not pertain to the Persian conquest of Lydia; see Briant (2002), 34; Cahill and Kroll (2005), 605–608.
- 9 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Kuhrt (2007a), 50.
- 10 Scheil (1914) and Olmstead (1948), 45, have interpreted this badly damaged passage to refer to the defection of the Gobryas of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, whom these scholars suppose was a Babylonian governor in Elam. However, it is uncertain whether the toponym Elamiyya relates to Elam; see Beaulieu (1989), 201.
- 11 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Fried (2004), 25, 28. Cameron (1973), 46, believes this fragmentary entry to reference the activity of Persian troops by the Diyala River in northern Mesopotamia, but Uruk is in southern Mesopotamia.
- 12 According to S. Smith (1944), 46, 151–152, Nabonidus did not relocate the deities of these cities to Babylon, because the cities were situated within the Median Wall.
- 13 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Lambert (2007).
- 14 The reference to anointing vessels being filled before Cyrus is based on the translation of Kuhrt (2007a), 50. Oppenheim (1985), 539, translated the line to state that twigs were scattered in the streets to ease the approach of Cyrus' chariot.
- 15 The sixth column of the Verse Account of Nabonidus also alludes to Cyrus' imposition of peace in the city.
- 16 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Oppenheim (1985), 539. See also Kuhrt (2007a), 51. For alternate translations, see Grayson (1975), 110; Glassner (2004), 239.
- 17 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Oppenheim in Pritchard (1955), 306. Other translations refer to Cyrus' appointment of Gubaru as the governor over the existing district officers of Babylonia.
- 18 This sentence has been adapted from the translation of Oppenheim

in Pritchard (1955), 306. Other analysts of the text have read the line to state that the people bared or shaved their heads.

The Cyrus Cylinder

- 1 See Harmatta (1971b), 218–219.
- 2 See Walker (1972); Kuhrt (1983), (1987a), (2007a), 72–74, (2007b), (2007c), and (2007d), 125.
- 3 The role of the king as a builder was of paramount ideological importance in ancient Babylonia and was often emphasized in legitimization texts; see Porter (1993), 44.
- 4 See Kuhrt (2007a), 72, (2007b), 175–176, 181–184, and (2007c), 110–112, 119–122. In the latter two papers, Kuhrt draws attention to the especially close resemblances between the Cyrus Cylinder and the inscriptions of the eighth century BCE Chaldean king Marduk-apla-iddin and the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II.
- 5 Cyrus dealt with other priests for inscriptions in temples dedicated to gods besides Marduk. Thus, the inscription attributed to Cyrus from the sacred precinct of Ur ascribes his victory over Nabonidus to the intervention of the god Sin, whose temple was located within the precinct.
- 6 See Oppenheim (1985), 543, footnote 4: “This touches on a problem complex that so far has not evoked much interest among the linguists dealing with the Old Persian corpus of royal inscriptions. In style, these ‘speaking’ inscriptions correspond to those written by the Urartian kings . . . and to those in hieroglyphic Hittite, but their function in each civilization needs separate investigations.” The gist of this statement applies equally well to the interpretation of Akkadian texts commissioned by Persian, as opposed to Mesopotamian, rulers.
- 7 See Gray (1901), 158–159; Olmstead (1948), 121–128; Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989), 272.
- 8 Briant (2002), 553.
- 9 Consider the example of Xerxes’ Daiva Inscription, which describes the destruction of a single pagan sanctuary but should be interpreted as a general proscription against the cult of the Daivas; see Herzfeld (1947), 381–401.
- 10 The fragments, which have been in the museum’s possession since 1881, were identified by Wilfred Lambert and Irving Finkel.
- 11 See Finkel (2013), 20–23.
- 12 Arnold and Michalowski (2006), 427. Although the Cylinder inscription notably suppresses any reference to the Battle of Opis, Babylonian business tablets dated to mere days after the Persian occupation demonstrate no interruption in everyday life in Babylon and other major cities; see Razmjou (2013), 117–118. The conquest

was, indeed, peaceful.

- 13 See, for example, Luckenbill (1927), Part Two, 225 (“Esarhaddon . . . restorer of Esagila and Babylon . . . who returned the captive people of the lands out of [lacuna] to their [homes].”), 253 (“As for the enslaved Babylonians . . . their plundered possessions I restored. The naked I clothed and turned their feet into the road to Babylon. To resettle the city, to rebuild the temples, to set out plantations, to dig irrigation-ditches I encouraged them.”). Van der Spek (2013) mentions two other instances of first millennium BCE Mesopotamian rulers restoring exiled groups to their homes: first, the Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III’s repatriation of his countrymen mentioned in the *Synchronistic History*, and second, Sargon II’s liberation of Assyrian sympathizers taken captive by Merodach-Baladin. But these examples are not really apposite to Cyrus’ case, as each involves only the repatriation of Assyrians or Assyrian supporters imprisoned by the Babylonians during the course of a war between the two nations.
- 14 Kuhrt (1983) suggests that Cyrus never took steps to rebuild these shrines. However, her skepticism seems extreme in light of other studies that have confirmed his restoration of exiled and dilapidated sanctuaries; see Bickerman (1946); Porter (1993), 59–60; Fried (2003); Razmjou (2013), 117.
- 15 See Kuhrt (1983), 89–90. However, the so-called *Verse Account* indicates that Nabonidus made oppressive labor demands in connection with his construction of temples in Harran and Tema.
- 16 See Harmatta (1971b), 227–229.
- 17 See Harmatta (1971b), 222–223.
- 18 See Van der Spek (1982); Wiesehofer (2001), 42–55; Kuhrt (2007b) and (2007c).
- 19 The Bisutun monument shows Darius’ enemies as captives, and military scenes occasionally occur on seal impressions and minor artworks manufactured in the provinces. However, these renditions are typically stylized, unlike the realistic depictions of human suffering found in Assyrian art. Root (1979), 227–284, emphasizes another important feature of the Achaemenid artistic program: in tribute procession scenes, the Achaemenids portrayed their subjects as free men, whereas the Mesopotamians usually depicted their gift-bearers as military captives or slaves.
- 20 Seignobos (1975), 64. The context of this grisly passage is Ashurbanipal’s capture of Babylon, an episode overlooked or intentionally suppressed by the Marduk priesthood. The Bisutun Inscription (§ 32–33) describes Darius’ maiming and public execution of two claimants to the Median throne in some detail. However, these descriptions are much less vivid than what one

frequently encounters in Assyrian texts.

- 21 Holloway (2002), 83. The Assyrians ravaged Damascus in 732 BCE, Samaria in 722 BCE, Musasir in 713 BCE, Babylon in 689 BCE and 653 BCE, Sidon in 677 BCE, Thebes in 663 BCE, and Susa in 640 BCE, and the Babylonians devastated Nineveh in 612 BCE (the Medes also participated in this campaign), Ascalon in 604 BCE, Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Tyre in 572 BCE, and Bozrah in 553 BCE.
- 22 See Holloway (2002), 80–216, for cult suppressions perpetrated by the Assyrian kings. The ultimate conclusion of Holloway’s study is that the Assyrians tended to tolerate local cults in vassal states but often impinged upon such cults in territories under direct imperial control. In these latter territories, the Assyrians typically insisted upon the local worship of Ashur. The distinction with Achaemenid imperial policy is that the Persians generally supported local cults in lands that they formally annexed.
- 23 Assyrian deportations displaced more than 4.5 million individuals, mostly during the approximately 120-year period spanning the accession of Tiglath-pileser III (747 BCE) and the death of Ashurbanipal (627 BCE); see Roux (1992), 308. These displacements altered the cultural landscape in the lands west of the Euphrates River, where the population was thoroughly Assyrianized. Thus, the *Athura* of the Old Persian inscriptions probably denoted the region and inhabitants of Abarnahara (Trans-Euphrates), and not the Assyrian homeland in northern Mesopotamia, and the name if modern Syria derives from the ancient ethnonym of the displaced Assyrians; see Toynbee (1963a), 581, 654; Frye (1992); S. Parpola (2004); Rollinger (2006).
- 24 Toynbee (1963a), 580.
- 25 Some uncertainty exists as to whether this line refers to Nabonidus’ accession or his installation of Belshazzar as co-regent during his absence in Tema.
- 26 Shuanna was an archaic name for Babylon. The inscription uses the two names interchangeably.
- 27 Oppenheim (1985), 546, notes that the reference to Cyrus’ moral rectitude involves the non-Akkadian use of an Akkadian word, *isharu*, which normally means “straight” or “correct.” In a footnote, Oppenheim suggests that this curious usage may represent an attempt to reproduce the Iranian notion of *Arta* (“Truth,” “Order”).
- 28 Tintir is another archaic name for Babylon. Compare the statement concerning Cyrus’ approach to that made by Sargon II, in his annals: “At the command of the great lord Marduk I set my chariots in order; I prepared the camp and gave the command to advance against the hostile people of Chaldea [who had occupied Babylon]”; see Luckenbill (1927), Part Two, 14–15.

- 29 Oppenheim (1953), 315, translates this sentence: “His widespread troops – their number, like that of the water of a river, could not be established – strolled along, their weapons packed away.”
- 30 According to Schaudig (2001), 552, the claim that Cyrus “saved Babylon from hardship” alludes to the Babylonian creation epic, where the same statement signifies one of the important steps in Marduk’s ordering of the cosmos. See also Haubold (2007), 52.
- 31 M. Smith (1963), 415–417, highlights the similarities between everything preceding the conclusion of this sentence and the compositions of Second Isaiah (see Appendix X).
- 32 Oppenheim (1985), 549, characterizes this transition as “quite extraordinary for a Mesopotamian royal inscription, because the literary pattern of the text category to which the Cylinder belongs does not admit such ‘mimesis.’” He therefore conjectures that it may represent an attempt to render an actual address that Cyrus issued to his new Babylonian subjects. Finkel (2013), 24, espouses a similar view.
- 33 Cyrus and his ancestors are also described as city rulers, to judge from the Akkadian determinative *URU*, which consistently appears before the toponym “Anshan” in their titulary. According to Zournatzi (2011), this characterization of the early Achaemenids as urban kings served to portray the Persian conqueror as a legitimate Mesopotamian monarch, for the Mesopotamians had long lived in cities and described the continuum of Mesopotamian history in terms of the transfer of power from one urban center to another.
- 34 Similar statements appear in the inscriptions of other Mesopotamian kings, including Hammurabi, who in one instance declares: “The dispersed people of the land of Sumer and Akkad, I gathered together and I provided pastures and watering places for them. I shepherded them in abundance and plenty and made them dwell in peaceful dwellings.” See Frayne (1990), 341. An inscription of Ashurbanipal demonstrates that it was acceptable to invoke this ideal after inflicting great carnage: “On the rest of the inhabitants of Babylon, Cutha, and Sippar, who had escaped the slaughter, carnage, and famine [that I had brought upon them], I took pity and ordered their lives to be spared. I settled them in Babylon.” See Luckenbill (1927), Part Two, 305. The Cyrus Cylinder notably excludes references to such violence.
- 35 Herzfeld (1947), 447, sees in this line a possible reference to the Mithraic title *Ramashayanam*, or “Bringer of Peace to the Inhabited Lands.” However, the statement is generic to Assyrian inscriptions, as well.
- 36 See, for example, Nehemiah 2:19. Note that, like Croesus, Cyrus did not permit the majority of Ionian cities to maintain

fortifications; see Cawkwell (2005), 32–35.

37 See Arnold and Michalowski (2006), 427.

The Verse Account of Nabonidus

1 See von Voigtlander (1963), 179, footnote 2; Kuhrt (1988), 123–124. Von Soden (1989) has also argued that portions of the Verse Account were composed before the Persian conquest of Babylonia.

2 See Tadmor and Machinist (1993), 146–151; Henze (1999), 61. Compare to Kuhrt (2007b) and (2007c), who treats this text as unreliable propaganda.

3 See Henze (1999), 61; S. Smith (1944), 29.

4 See Oppenheim's translation in Pritchard (1955), 312–314; Kuhrt (2007a), 75–80.

5 The Babylonians believed that each individual had a protective spirit that was the root of the person's life-force of intellect.

6 Nannar was another name for the moon-god Sin.

7 Lugal-shudu was an alternate name for the deity Ninurta, who was particularly popular among the inhabitants of northern Mesopotamia.

8 Ea was an important and benevolent Babylonian aquatic deity, often hailed with the epithet "Mummu," to emphasize his creative powers.

9 Adapa was one of the primordial great sages of Babylonian mythology, conceived of as a fish-man.

10 The Ekur was the hallowed temple of Enlil in Nippur.

11 S. Smith (1944), 45, has interpreted this verse as evidence that the Babylonians prevailed in certain battles against the Persians before 540 BCE and that Nabonidus embellished the importance of these victories in his propaganda. In this connection, Beaulieu (1989), 199, has theorized that the years for which no entries exist in the Babylonian Chronicle were left blank due to the systematic removal of material unfavorable to the Persians.

12 The lampooning of Zeriya and Rimut as sycophants of Nabonidus seems curious, since both officials retained their posts in the new Persian administration. Waerzeggers (2012) has recently provided a different interpretation this and the preceding lines to have Cyrus declare: "For whom was this temple built? This is its symbol. It is indeed (the symbol) of Bel! His symbol is a spade! Sin placed his crescent-mark on his own temple." Cyrus then removes the symbol of Sin from Esagila, and Zeriya and Rimut, salute the restoration of the temple's true identity.

13 The Babylonian Chronicle contains similar language.

14 The Cyrus Cylinder also alludes to this construction project.

15 This and the preceding line bear a strong resemblance to Isaiah 42:1–42:7.

The Dynastic Prophecy

1 See endnote 15 on page 650.

2 As translated by Van Der Spek (2003), 316.

Second Isaiah and the Cyrus Cylinder

1 See M. Smith (1963), 415–417.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages are from the New International Version of the Holy Bible. The translation of the Cyrus Cylinder is from Cogan (2003) and Finkel (2013), 4–7. M. Smith uses different translations.

3 This verse follows the translation of M. Smith (1963), 416.

4 M. Smith (1963), 417.

Second Isaiah, Cyrus, and Yahweh the Creator

1 M. Smith (1963), 419.

2 All biblical passages are from the New International Version of the Holy Bible.

3 See the footnote on page 227 regarding the subject of this and other so-called “Servant Songs.”

Cyrus and the Book of Daniel

1 Boadt (1984), 506–511.

2 See Bickerman (1967), 53.

3 See Herzfeld (1947), 829. Herzfeld bases this conclusion on his interpretation of Daniel 5:30. Most Bible translations interpret this verse to state that Darius the Mede was sixty-two when Babylon fell.

4 See Herzfeld (1947), 827. Also S. Smith (1944), 132, endnote 65.

5 See Bickerman (1967), 74–77. Also S. Smith (1944), 132, endnote 65: “But there is a reasonable case for believing that the writer of the book of Daniel used a story which is itself derived from Persian propaganda against Nabonidus, and may have used corrupt forms of names in the cuneiform document.” Megasthenes’ story was recounted by Abydenus and is preserved in Eusebius’ *Chronicles* (§ 49). According to this story, just before his death, Nabuchadnezzar received divine inspiration to ascend the roof of his palace and declare that a Persian mule, the son of a Median princess, would overthrow his kingdom. Nabuchadnezzar laid the blame for this impending calamity upon the future king Nabonidus, whom he cursed and condemned to an existence of living alone among the beasts and birds of the wilderness. Combining these disparate

accounts, none of which is by itself complete, we may reconstruct the original tale preserved in the Book of Daniel. Nabuchadrezzar had received forewarning that his kingdom would be usurped by the irreverent Nabonidus and, for this reason, condemned the usurper to a course of action that would turn the gods against him and ensure his downfall. Note that, in Herodotus' account (1.55–1.57) of a prophecy uttered by the Oracle of Delphi, Cyrus is also alluded to as a mule because of his half-Persian, half-Median ancestry.

- 6 See Bickerman (1967), 64–65. The phenomenon is also discussed by Kingsley (1995), 195.
- 7 See Bickerman (1967), 62–77.
- 8 See Daniel 2:39–2:45.
- 9 See Bickerman (1967), 62: “When the Persian Shah Ala-ed-Din Mohammed (1199–1220) saw himself in a dream as having a head of gold, and other parts of the body made of silver, bronze, lead, and tin, his vision indicated that he would only have four successors of his family.”
- 10 See Daniel 8:1–4, 19–20.
- 11 See Bickerman (1967), 101.
- 12 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 633d–e; Isaiah 46:11. For a possible connection between the original prophecy underlying Daniel chapter eight and the Quranic tale of Dhu'l-Qarnain, see Appendix XIX.

The Satrapies

- 1 See Herzfeld (1968), 289.
- 2 See Herodotus 3.89–3.97. One Euboean talent equals fifty-seven pounds; see Martin (2007), 777, 779.
- 3 See Burn (1962), 120–126; Cameron (1973); Vogelsang (1992), 169–173.
- 4 See Herzfeld (1968), 292–349; Jacobs, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Achaemenid Satrapies.”
- 5 Note that Herodotus (3.89) explicitly states that Darius launched his provincial reforms immediately after becoming king, whereas elsewhere (6.42), the Greek historian suggests that the settling of tribute did not occur until the last decade of Darius' reign. See also Cook (1983), 81. Olmstead (1948), 291–299, treats Herodotus' list as a record from the reign of Artaxerxes I.
- 6 See Toynbee (1963a).

Paradises

- 1 See Lincoln (2003) and (2007). Also Skaervo (2013), 556.
- 2 Famous examples from the Safavid period to the present include the

Bagh-e Eram (“Garden of Heaven”) in Shiraz and *Hasht Behesht* (“Eighth Heaven”) in Esfahan. The name of only one Achaemenid paradise has survived, and that is the **Vispa-shiyatish*, or “All Happiness,” garden situated outside Persepolis. This is also the name of the garden of heaven in the Zoroastrian legend of the Magian Viraz; see Lincoln (2007), 79.

- 3 See Rose (2011), 59–60.
- 4 See Briant (2002), 200–203, 234.
- 5 See Llewellyn-Jones (2013), 92; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.12, where Cyrus orders his satraps to establish paradises in their provinces.
- 6 See Floor (2011), 218–221, citing Quintus Curtius Rufus (8.1.19) and other sources.
- 7 See, for example, Diodorus Siculus 16.41.2. Also Briant (2002), 237–238.
- 8 Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 4.20–4.25, translated by Todd.
- 9 See Stronach (1997a), 50–53, and (2013).

Herodotus’ Roster of the Achaemenid Army

- 1 See, for example, Olmstead (1948), 237; Toynbee (1963a), 591.
- 2 See, for example, Briant (2002), 196–198.
- 3 See, for example, Drews (1973), 28–29; Cawkwell (2005), 239–243.
- 4 See, for example, Barkworth (1993), 158.
- 5 Although Herodotus fails to mention shields or body armor among the Bactrians, Sakas, and other eastern Iranian troops, it can hardly be supposed that they lacked such protection; see Hignett (1963), 40.
- 6 The Persepolis reliefs depict the Cappadocians in standard Median attire. The disparity between these reliefs and the description offered by Herodotus owes to the fact that the Cappadocian ruling class was, at this stage, of Iranian descent, whereas the lower classes were native Anatolians; see Vogelsang (1992), 176–177.
- 7 Herodotus here describes the rank and file of the eastern Anatolian and Caucasian soldiers clustered together with the Armenians. The true Armenians dressed and fought like Medes; see Vogelsang (1992), 176–177.
- 8 The implication is that, before Xerxes’ expedition, a great many Medes had been exiled to the Persian Gulf. Some may have been displaced on account of their religious beliefs. Consider the evidence of the snake burials at Bahrain, see endnote 58 on page 628.
- 9 Elsewhere in his narrative, Herodotus (7.40–7.41) mentions elite units of cavalry, but he does not describe them in his army roster.

- 10 Such tactics obviously could not be deployed in pitched battles. Herodotus may here be describing a tactic employed in one-on-one duels, or alternatively, he may be providing a garbled reminiscence of an equestrian sport or exercise, witnessed by one of his informants; see Head (1992), 33.
- 11 Other translators render the name of the Caspeirians as “Caspians.” This common ethnic name belonged to a widespread pre-Iranian people, who inhabited much of the Iranian plateau and what is now Afghanistan. The Caspians brigaded with the Paricanians presumably lived in the vicinity of Kerman, whereas those serving with the Bactrians came from the Hindu Kush region.

The Saka Tigrakhauda

- 1 See Herodotus 1.201.
- 2 See Vogelsang (1992), 223, 233; Yablonsky (1995c), 248–251.
- 3 See Strabo 11.8.3, 11.8.8. See also Polybius 10.48.
- 4 See Strabo 11.6.2–11.6.4, 11.8.2.
- 5 See Minns (2010), 111–112; Tarn (1951), 80–81; Frye (1984), 207, footnote 7.
- 6 See Herodotus 4.20.
- 7 According to Herodotus (7.64), the Saka Haumavarga also sported pointed hats, and archaeologists have uncovered headgear of this type in the tombs of nomadic warlords located in other parts of the Eurasian steppe, far removed from the Saka Tigrakhauda’s territories. The most famous such find is the magnificent golden headdress of an eminent Saka of the fifth or fourth century BCE in the burial mound at Issyk in eastern Kazakhstan; see Rolle (1989), 51.
- 8 See Marquart (1901), 52–66.
- 9 See the testimony of Ananias of Shirak (Pseudo-Moses), in Marquart (1901), 141, 155–157.
- 10 See Strabo 11.11.2.
- 11 See Herodotus 3.92.
- 12 See Herodotus 1.125.
- 13 Vogelsang (1988) argues for the Orthocorbyantes living to the northeast of the Hyrcanians. Shahbazi (1982), 223–226, inclines toward a location in the Caucasus Mountains.
- 14 See Herodotus 1.202, where the reference appears to be to cannabis.
- 15 See Minns (2010), 11, footnote 3.
- 16 See Murphy and Mallory (2000). Some evidence of ritualistic cannibalism has been gleaned from the well-preserved bodies of the nomadic chieftains found at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains; see

Rolle (1989), 31. But these nomads may not have been Sakas. Indeed the nomads living to the west of the Aral sea during the sixth century BCE seem to have cremated the bodies of their dead; Yablonsky (2006).

17 See Darius I, Bisutun Inscription § 75.

18 See Herodotus 1.216. Further evidence for the Sakas' reverence of the sun may be gleaned from the several bronze appliques in the shape of a panther or lioness discovered in the tomb of the Massagetan warrior at Sakar-Chaga in Kazakhstan. According to Yablonsky (1995), feline beasts of prey were a symbol of the sun across the ancient Near East. Consider also the role of the lion as a symbol of Mithra, presumably arising from the zodiacal belief that the sun is most powerful when in the "house" of Leo.

19 According to Strabo (11.11.8), the Earth Mother was the chief deity of the Derbices, who, out of respect for her, abstained from sacrificing or eating female animals.

20 See Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.4–23.6.6; Herodotus 4.127; Olbrycht (2003), 76–77. The European Scythians' reverence for their chieftains was so great, that, upon a chieftain's death, many of his servants and guards were sacrificed so that they could look after their lord in the afterlife. Indeed, archaeologists have confirmed the report of Herodotus (4.72), who states that the corpses of sacrificed guards were mounted on dead horses (with both beast and rider transfixes by a spear) and arranged around the chieftain's tomb.

21 See Polyaeus 7.12.

22 On the belligerence of the Sarmatian women, consider the testimony of the Roman author Pomponius Mela (3.4), who stated that a female Sarmatian did not marry until she had slain an enemy in combat. Herodotus (4.110–4.116), categorizes the Sarmatians as the children of the Scythians and Amazons. As to the discovered bodies of female Scythian warriors, a number of them exhibit evidence of wounds sustained in combat; see Baumer (2012), 262. A strong tradition of matriarchy is also suspected to have existed among the ancient nomads of Tibet, who shared many customs with the steppe nomads.

23 See Wilde (1999), 56. That the ancient Iranians were generally captivated by stories of female warriors is evidenced by the esteemed place that the ninth century BCE Assyrian Queen Semiramis occupied in the legendary cycles of the Achaemenid period. After the death of her husband Shamshi-Adad V, this otherwise innocuous princess served as regent for four years (811–807 BCE) until her son Adad-Nirari III came of age. She presumably led an army on a brief campaign into Media, which expedition formed the genesis of later stories told by Iranian minstrels, who

- credited her with the conquest of countries as far afield as Bactria and India; see Roux (1992), 273.
- 24 See Altheim and Stiehl (1970), 127–128. Also Soudavar (2006), 156–157.
- 25 See Cook (1983), 37, 235. Further evidence for the inclusion of both Iranians and Turco-Mongolians in Saka tribal groups may be gleaned from Alexander’s encounter with the Scythian king Carthasis near the Jaxartes River; see Quintus Curtius Rufus 7.7.1. Carthasis had recently attained power following the death of his brother, the previous Scythian king. As Theodor Noldeke recognized, Carthasis’ name resembles Turkic *kardashi*, “brother.” On the other hand, the name of Tomyris’ son Spargapises is almost certainly Iranian. Altheim and Stiehl (1970), 127–128, have compared the name to Avestan **Sparega-paesa*, “Beautiful Child.”
- 26 Regarding the Fish-Eaters, see Herodotus 1.202. Regarding the *Enarees*, see Herodotus 1.105. *Enaree* may represent the Greek rendering of Old Iranian **Anarya*, or “non-Aryan.” Alternatively, it may signify **Anara*, “non-male.” Minns (2010), 111, hints at connections between the Massagetae and the Issedones, whom some scholars have identified with the Wu-Sun of northwestern China.
- 27 See Yablonsky (1995b), 213, 222, and (1995c), 248.

Saka Epic Traditions

- 1 On the legend of the Scythian Heracles, see P’yankov (2006). For Rostam’s origins, see Yarshater (1983), 453–457. Note, however, that Rostam’s name is probably of Iranian, as opposed to Saka origin, as Old Persian **Rastahma* and Median **Rashtakhma* are both attested in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets; see Gershevitch (1969), 226–227; Tavernier (2007), 282–283.
- 2 See Herodotus 4.5–4.10.
- 3 Interestingly enough, the steppe nomads deemed their own lifestyle to be elite and “noble” and therefore referred to themselves as Aryans. This may be gleaned from the etymology of the ethnonym of the Alans, a nomadic group closely affiliated with the Sakas and Sarmatians. The name “Alan” stems from Old Iranian **Arya*, or “Aryan.”

The Cyrus Legends and the Iranian Epics

- 1 See Yarshater (1971) and (1983), 389–390.
- 2 Eilers (1974), 8.
- 3 S. Smith (1944), 31.
- 4 See Herzfeld (1947), 320–321.
- 5 See Herodotus 1.122, where the tale of Cyrus being raised by a dog

- is spread so that the prince “might be thought by the Persians to have been preserved in a more supernatural manner.” See also Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.1.22, where Artembares, one of Cyrus’ Median supporters, declares “that he for one would never forsake Cyrus, the bravest, noblest, and best of men, and *a hero whose lineage was divine*” (*emphasis added*).
- 6 See Boyce (1975), 19; Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1985), 463.
 - 7 See Bivar (1988a) and (2000).
 - 8 See Noldeke (1930), 12–18; Herzfeld (1947), 320–321; Bivar (2000).
 - 9 On the general significance of Sargon, see Haubold (2012), 6–8.
 - 10 See S. Smith (1944), 31; Drews (1974); Cook (1983), 25–27; Kuhrt (2003), 356; Haubold (2012), 6–7.
 - 11 See M. West (2007), 260.
 - 12 See Bivar (1988a) and (2000), 21–22.
 - 13 The pervasiveness of the propaganda disseminated by Cyrus seems to have resulted in the more specific stereotyping of Azhi Dahaka in ancient Iranian folklore as the archetypal Median king and innovator of esoteric forms of Mithra-worship and other cults; see Appendix III.
 - 14 See Yarshater (1983), 451.
 - 15 See *Yasht* 5.49, 15.32.
 - 16 For Biruni’s theory, see Yarshater (1976), 58. Several modern scholars support the identification of Cyrus with Kavi Husravah; see A. Warner and E. Warner (1906), 190–91; Seth (1941), 13–33; Herzfeld (1947), 100–101, 320, 445–446, 633, 805, and (1968), 16–17; Duleba (1995); Khaleghi-Motlagh (2009–2010).
 - 17 In ancient Iran, women were known by their personal names before marriage but by their tribal names afterward; see Herzfeld (1968), 261. “Frangrasyi” thus signifies the daughter of Frangrasyan – that is, the “Turanian princess.” “Fryana” (Greek *Phlianos*) was a genuine Saka name – see Herzfeld (1968), 326 – that appears in the Gathas (*Yasna* 46.12) as that of an important Turanian convert to Zoroastrianism. This Fryana was apparently typecast in the legends as the archetypal good Turanian. The names “Syavarshan,” “Husravah,” and “Fryana” are attested in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets; see Tavernier (2007), 184, 204, 319, 330.
 - 18 See Cicero *On the Divine* 1.23.46.
 - 19 See *Yasht* 19.56–64, 82; Herzfeld (1947), 633–635.
 - 20 Strabo 15.3.6. See also Herodotus 1.113, where Cyrus is raised by the cowherd under a different name. “Agradates” may have meant the son of Aghraeratha.

- 21 See *Yasht* 19.77. Aghraeratha, whose Avestan epithet *narava* may signify “half-man” or “wild-man,” was one of the legendary prototypes for the commoner responsible for raising Cyrus in each of the founder legends preserved by Herodotus and Ctesias; see Herzfeld (1947), 822–824. Note that Pahlavi texts characterize Aghraeratha as identical to or the father of Gopatshah, whose name means either “Cattle-Chief” or “King’s Cattle-Chief,” thus recalling the cowherd of Herodotus’ narrative.
- 22 See Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 14.633d–e.
- 23 See Rig Veda 1.53.9–10. These verses deal with Sushravas, the Indo-Aryan equivalent of Kavi Husravah.
- 24 See *Fragments of the Greek Historians* 90 F66 (23–29).
- 25 The motif of the chase also appears in the legendary account of the rise to power of Ardashir, founder of the Sasanid dynasty; see *Karnamag-i Ardashir-i Babagan* 2.14–3.21.
- 26 See Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 4.2.15.
- 27 *Menog-i Khrat* 2.93; *Denkart* 7.1.39; *Bundahishn* 17.7.
- 28 See Herodotus 1.211; Strabo 11.8.5.
- 29 See *Yasht* 9.18.
- 30 See Ctesias *Persica*, Epitome of Photius § 1.
- 31 See Duleba (1995), 20–21.
- 32 See Herodotus 1.209; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.7.2.
- 33 See Khaleghi-Motlagh (2009–2010), 264–265.
- 34 The primitive myth’s details may be reconstructed as follows: an evil spirit or dragon of drought (Frangrasyan) slays the tutelary deity of a river (Aghraeratha) and a vegetation god (Syavarshan) to cause famine, but later, the vegetation god’s offspring (Husravah) joins forces with another deity (Haoma), who symbolizes the healing aspects of plants, to kill the evil spirit. For Frangrasyan’s origins as a spirit of drought, see Yarshater (1983), 442, and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Afrāsīāb.” Yarshater has demonstrated that the later rendering of the villain’s name, *Afrasiyab*, is a compound word, in which the initial element derives from “Frangrasyan,” meaning “He Who Makes Disappear,” and the final component is *ab*, or “water.” *Afrasiyab* thus means “He Who Makes Water Disappear.” The recasting of the drought-demon as the embodiment of Turanian oppression was appropriate, given the propensity of the steppe nomads to destroy irrigation systems. As to the use of the narrative in pre-Achaemenid times, Herodotus (1.106) recounts that the Median ruler Cyaxares overthrew his Scythian overlords by getting them drunk at a banquet and then killing them. Here, we have another rationalization of the Avestan tale of Kavi Husravah defeating Frangrasyan through the help of

the god Haoma.

- 35 See Tabari *History*, Volume 1, 647, 691 (Leiden edition). See also endnote 135 on page 596.
- 36 See Boyce (1982), 68; Shahbazi (1977) and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Goštāsp.”
- 37 Vogelsang (2002), 105, has argued that the name “Vishtaspa” had evolved into an important political-religious title in northeastern Iran before the Achaemenid period due to the prevalent regional influence of Zoroastrianism, and it is known that Cyrus adopted local titles throughout the territories he conquered. Evidence of a link between Cyrus and Kavi Vishtaspa may exist in Ctesias’ *Persica* (Epitome of Photius § 11). This author obtained much of his information about the early Achaemenids from the members of Artaxerxes II’s court and transmitted the name of the Magian usurper (Gaumata) who overthrew Cambyses II as Spentadata, which represents the Greek rendering of Avestan “Spentodata” (New Persian *Esfandiyar*), meaning “Created by the Holy Spirit.” In the epics, this decidedly Zoroastrian name belongs to Kavi Vishtaspa’s son, whom the Avesta and Pahlavi texts portray as a great champion of the Good Religion. It is exceedingly doubtful that anyone in the court circles that Ctesias frequented would have bestowed this sacred name upon the Magian pretender who nearly overthrew the Achaemenid dynasty. Rather, the likely truth of the matter is that Ctesias mistakenly referred to Gaumata as “Spentodata,” because he had heard the latter name in connection with the historical Bardiya, the very man whose identity Gaumata coopted in order to seize power. See Herodotus (3.61), who provides that the Magian pretender and Cyrus’ son shared the same name. Consider also the later references to Spentodata as *Ruyin-Tan* (literally, “Brazen-Bodied”) because of his invincibility in combat. This epithet recalls Bardiya’s nickname **Tanuvazraka*, meaning “Large-Bodied,” which has a similar connotation; see *Denkard* 7.5.12, where another of Kavi Vishtaspa’s sons receives the epithet “Large-Bodied.” Assuming Bardiya to have been associated with Spentodata, we may expect a connection, already in Achaemenid times, between Cyrus and Kavi Vishtaspa. For alternate theories based on Ctesias’ account, see Maspero (1900), 670, footnote 3; Herzfeld (1947), 95–96, 205–206.
- 38 Another issue regards the significance of the Cyrus legends as a medium for the transmission of motifs between the stories of the various epic heroes associated with the Persian founder. The tales of Cyrus’ birth and upbringing were complex narratives that combined materials derived from the epical accounts of Thraetona and Kavi Husravah. It is conceivable that the general resemblances

between the stories of these heroes in the *Shahnameh* and other late texts reflect the close association that each hero attained with Cyrus.

39 See *Bundahishn* 17.7. All pertinent sources agree that Kavi Husravah preceded Zoroaster by at least two generations.

40 See Duleba (1995), 20–21.

41 See Boyce (1975), 276.

42 See Yarshater (1971) and (1983), 389–390. Daryaei (1995), (2006a), and (2006b), dates this historiographical development to the middle centuries of Sasanid rule.

Cyrus and Dhu'l-Qarnain

1 S. Smith (1944), 40; Gadd (1958), 86–88; Torrey (1933), 10–15.

2 See Quran 18.84–18.98.

3 See, for example, Noldeke (1890), 31, and (1892), 30; A. Anderson (1927); Newman (1996), 377. Noldeke's is the authoritative work in Western scholarship.

4 This is the fundamental argument of Wheeler (1998), 203. Wheeler debunks the dating of the Alexander Romance, which serves as the lynch-pin to Noldeke's identification of Dhu'l-Qarnain with Alexander.

5 See Josephus *The Jewish War* 7.7.4.

6 See Horowitz (1998), 32–33, on the reference to a “Great Wall” situated at the northern extreme of the inhabited world in a first millennium BCE Babylonian map. For the Persians' construction of a wall in the Caucasus, see Moses Dasxuranci *History of the Caucasian Albanians* § 83. Note the supposed location of the Caucasus barrier near the Cyrus River, which, some historians believe, was named after the Persian conqueror.

7 See Mahmoodian (1992), 38–39.

8 See Redslob (1855), 214–223. The following analysis of the prophecy in Daniel chapter 8 is based on his work. Wheeler (1998), 16, states that an identification with Cyrus is possible but unlikely, given that the Persian conqueror's name is not mentioned in connection with Dhu'l-Qarnain in the early Islamic exegesis. But such reasoning is not decisive, especially if one interprets the Quranic tale in light of the Book of Daniel. The Book of Daniel contains a garbled account of Babylonian and Achaemenid history, in which the names of historical kings are often confused or purposefully covered up. So it could be that the memory of Cyrus' deeds survived, even though his name was forgotten – which is more or less what happened to Cyrus in Iran.

9 Daniel 8:3–4, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.

- 10 Daniel 8:5–8, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.
- 11 Daniel 8:20–22, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.
- 12 According to Bickerman (1967), 108, the ram was the zodiacal sign of Iran in Jewish astrology and, therefore, a fitting representation of the Achaemenid Empire. The Iranians themselves viewed the ram as an avatar of the war god Verethraghna, who bestows the Royal Glory in the Avesta. Following Mowlana Abol Kalam Azad, Sami (1971), 191–192, has speculated that the inspiration for the symbolism in Daniel 8 derived from the image of the four-winged guardian at Pasargadae. The crown worn by this phantom contains two horns – one pointing east and the other west – belonging to the *Ovis longipes palaeoaegyptiacus*, “a variety of ram apparently common during the Middle Kingdom in Egypt, but rare thereafter”; Mallowan (1985), 391–392. Although Sami’s theory seems fantastic, it is curious that the same head-dress was donned by the Canaanite deity Baal, whose cult competed with and influenced Yahweh’s; see Barnett (1969). The Pasargadae figure may have been known outside Iran as a symbol of the royal genius, in whose honor fourth century BCE Persian nobles always prepared a seat at the dinner table; see Plutarch *Life of Artaxerxes* § 15; Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 6.252b. Herodotus (1.210) seems to have remembered a similar figure when he remarked that Cyrus recognized Darius’ future greatness upon seeing the son of Hystaspes in a dream “with wings upon his shoulders, shadowing with the one wing Asia, and Europe with the other”; see Mallowan (1985), 394.
- 13 The discrepancy that Daniel’s ram charges to the south, whereas Dhu’l-Qarnain marches to the east is explainable on the basis that, from the perspective of an inhabitant of ancient Babylon, where the original legends preserved in the Book of Daniel was written, a march along the northern coast of the Persian Gulf toward India would have been considered a move to the south; see Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.6.19–20. According to Strabo (15.2.2), this coastline was inhabited by primitive aborigines, who were practically naked and, for lack of trees, lived in huts made from the bones of dead whales. One might fancy that the memory of these aborigines formed the basis of the Quranic account of Dhu’l-Qarnain encountering an eastern people who lacked protection against the sun. By the same token, Dhu’l-Qarnain’s great metal wall in the northern mountains may allude to Cyrus’ northern conquests and construction of fortresses and other efforts to keep the Sakas and Scythians at bay. Regarding Dhu’l-Qarnain’s journey to the spring of murky water in the distant west, the Persian believed that the

Sea of Marmara, where the Aegean and Black Seas converge, was a turbid, salty water fed by an underground spring of fresh water; see Herodotus 7.34–7.35; Herzfeld (1947), 630–651. Early Greek writers called the Black Sea the Pontus Axeinos, derived from Old Iranian **akhshaina*, meaning “not shiny,” “unlit,” or “dark.” This was due to the reduced salinity of the Black Sea, which enables higher concentrations of microalgae to exist, hence the Black Sea’s relatively dark hue. The ancient Mesopotamians considered the seas to the west of Anatolia and the Levant to constitute a single body of water, which they called the “Bitter River” or “Sea of the Setting Sun.” It is conceivable that the Quranic tale and the parallel stories in the Alexander Romance derived from a literalistic interpretation of the names and supposed characteristics of these western waters. At minimum, it must be conceded that Cyrus presented himself as the conqueror of the known world in his propaganda and that, to judge by the evidence of a first millennium BCE map, the Babylonians imagined landmarks similar to those encountered by Dhu’l-Qarnain as delimiting the frontiers of the civilized world (for example, a Bitter River or Sea of the Setting Sun in the distant west and a Great Wall in the distant north); see Horowitz (1998). Haubold (2012) has convincingly proven the influence of Babylonian geography upon Persian royal ideology, and Grelot (1958) and Milik (1976), 15, 38, have argued that the Babylonian world view impacted the fantastic geography of the Book of Enoch, which of all the non-canonical Jewish texts bears the greatest resemblance in style and spirit to the Book of Daniel.

14 See Bickerman (1967), 61–101.

15 Consider that the biblical account of Nabuchadrezzar’s madness in the fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel erroneously obscures the true subject of the story, Nabonidus, whose identity is accurately preserved in the Dead Sea scrolls; see Bickerman (1967), 74–77.

16 See Arjomand (2002), 108–109.

17 Originally published in 1950 as part of a broader exegesis on the Quran, the portions of Azad’s work dealing with Dhu’l-Qarnain were translated into Persian by Bastani Parizi in 1996. Like a number of Moslem scholars, Azad proceeds on the basis that the Quran is the infallible word of God and historically accurate in all respects. He, therefore, bases much of his argument on the premise that the Quran would be more likely to exalt the Zoroastrian Cyrus than the pagan Alexander. In so doing, he ignores the possibility that Muhammad could have heard and accepted the historically inaccurate traditions that arose in Iran and other parts of the Near East, in which Alexander was remembered as a monotheist.

The Achaemenid King as Universal Savior

- 1 See Mole (1963). De Jong (2010), 88, goes so far as to state that the tale of the creation represented the only real myth in Zoroastrianism.
- 2 Before Zoroaster, the Iranians seem to have believed in the cyclical and temporary reattainment of a lost golden age that had existed under Yima; see Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 18–21. They may also have believed in the notion of historical time lasting nine thousand years but without true apocalyptic overtones; see Herzfeld (1947), 2–3. The Scythians seem also to have believed in such a system; see Herodotus 4.7
- 3 See Kreyenbroek (2002), 44–45.
- 4 On Zoroaster's likely perception of the Saoshyant as a future prince, see *Yasna* 48.9, as interpreted by Duchesne-Guillemin (1963), 38. But the Saoshyant's royal extraction is not explicit.
- 5 Some scholars interpret the six-thousand-year figure as a defect in the manuscript that should be read as either six hundred or sixty years; see, for example, Shahbazi (1977), 34–35. Gnoli (2000), 47–48, interprets the six thousand year figure differently, to demonstrate that Zoroaster lived close in time to Xerxes. However, his interpretation may be rejected on the basis that it depends upon a late Pahlavi iteration of the millenary scheme. See endnote 112 on page 617.
- 6 See Strouve (1959–1960). Other classical sources date Zoroaster to five thousand years before the Trojan War or six thousand years before Plato. The latter date is significant for it demonstrates Plato's desire to portray himself as the second coming of Zoroaster. For Plato's extensive ties to Iran, see Kingsley (1995); Vasunia (2007); Olmstead (1948), 449–450.
- 7 See Lincoln (2003), 146–150, and (2007), 51–65. Lincoln does not characterize this propaganda as Zoroastrian but, rather, within a broader Iranian tradition. However, Clarisse Herrenschildt, upon whose interpretation of the inscriptions Lincoln draws heavily, deems the Achaemenids to have been Zoroastrians; see Herrenschildt and Lincoln (2004), 281. For Cyrus as the saviour, see Rose (2011), 42.
- 8 See Schaudig (2001), 552; Haubold (2007), 51.
- 9 Haubold (2007), 51–52.
- 10 Scholars had long before recognized the notion of the three empires as a Persian conception; see Swain (1940); Winston (1966); Bickerman (1967), 65–71. But it was Metzler (1975) who proposed that the scheme was invented under Cyrus.
- 11 The Assyrian, Median, and Persian Empires are all portrayed as universal states in Ctesias' *Persica*. This succession of empires was

- further known to Aemilius Sura, Tacitus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Appian. Consider also Darius I, Persepolis, Inscription e, in which reference is made to Persian rule lasting forever.
- 12 For the identification of the Royal Hero, see Root (1979), 303–307; Bivar (1975a), 95–96; Herzfeld (1941), 257.
 - 13 See Kuhrt (1987b), 53–54, who nevertheless suggests that the Persians may have interpreted the scene as the slaying of Azhi Dahaka or some other dragon whose death was believed to play a role in the natural cycle.
 - 14 For the time symbolism of the Persepolis monsters, see Windfuhr (2006). For the monsters as Daivas, see Soudavar (2012). Also note the resemblance between one of the Persepolis monsters and the statue of Angra Mainyu reproduced in Sarkhosh Curtis (1993), 12.
 - 15 Of course, heroic combat scenes were also frequently depicted in Achaemenid seal engravings, and it is doubtful that Saoshyant imagery was intended in all such manifestations. As noted by Garrison and Root (2001), 56–60, the heroic combat scenes were subject to broad and varying interpretations, even in antiquity. On the other hand, Windfuhr (2006), 64–67 insinuates that all iterations of heroic combat had astrological significance.
 - 16 The most complete treatment of this topic is by Herzfeld (1947), 827–840. Meyer (1921), 197–199, and Von Gall (1926), 268, also posited a Persian connection, going so far as to state that the biblical text could be used to determine how the Persepolis reliefs were colored. Eggler (2000), 58–83, discusses both the Iranian and non-Iranian elements of this passage.
 - 17 See Bickerman (1967), 102.
 - 18 Indeed, the Book of Daniel has been interpreted as an expression of Near Eastern resistance to Hellenism; see Swain (1940); Eddy (1961). The same development occurred in Zoroastrian religious history, which was altered to state that the Saoshyant would rise in response to the Macedonian conquest of Iran. This change is apparent in the Pahlavi *Zand-i Vahman Yasht* (3.20–3.29).
 - 19 Daniel 7:9–7:10, as translated in the New International Version.
 - 20 See Herzfeld (1947), 832–888. Compare to M. Smith, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Bible, ii. Persian Elements in the Bible.”
 - 21 Herzfeld (1947), 832. The Babylonians were familiar with the decimal system of counting but preferred to use the sexagesimal one.
 - 22 Herzfeld (1947), 832.
 - 23 Daniel 7:10, as translated in the New International Version.
 - 24 See *Yasht* 13.145; Von Gall (1926), 409–430.

- 25 Herzfeld (1947), 832–833.
- 26 Herzfeld (1947), 830, notes that this was the standard greeting accorded to Sasanid kings. The supplication also appears in the inscription of the sixth century BCE Egyptian dignitary Udjahorresne: “King Darius – may he live forever – commanded me to go to Egypt”
- 27 See Herzfeld (1947), 833–834.
- 28 In the Persepolis relief, Xerxes appears to stand behind Darius, but that is because the artist did not want the two figures to overlap; see Herzfeld (1947), 833.
- 29 Consider the testimony of the tenth century Moslem scholar Masudi, as explained by Klima (1959).

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Reza Zarghamee brings multiple perspectives and deep knowledge to his account of the life of Cyrus the Great. Born in London in 1978 to Iranian parents, Zarghamee grew up in Boston. His immersion in the ancient history of Iran started early: At the age of thirteen, he began studying Old Persian cuneiform at the urging of Professor Richard Frye, a founder of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. Later, he took courses in Zoroastrianism and Manichaenism taught by another eminent Harvard scholar, Profs. Øystein Skjaervø. He attended Columbia University, pursuing a double-major in history and biology, studying Persian language and literature, and graduating with honors in 2000. Three years later, he received a J.D. degree from Harvard Law School, where his writings included a comparison of ancient Near Eastern legal systems. Since then, he has practiced law at the firm of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP while continuing his scholarly investigations of the era of Cyrus. His extensive travels in the Middle East have taken him across much of the empire founded by that giant of history twenty-six centuries ago.

He is currently at work on a life of Darius, the second book of *Iran's Age of Empire*.

INDEX

A

Aban Yash (hymn to Anahita)

Aboriginal people of Iran

Abradates

Abrahamic tradition

Absolutism

Accountants

Acculturation. *See also* Cultural syncretism

Aces River (Hari Rud)

Achaemenes

Achaemenid military processions

Achaemenid provincial administration. *See also* Local officials' role in Persian Empire

Adad-Guppi

Adad Nirari II

Administration and bureaucracy of Persian Empire. *See also* Satraps

Aelian

Aeschylus

Aeshma

African native soldiers

Afterlife

Agriculture

 in Babylonia

 development of

 of early Iranian people

 irrigation projects

 land improvements for

 of Persians and Medes

Ahiqar

Ahramazda

 in art

 benevolent nature of

 Magi worship of

 manifest in the sky

- Medes worship of
- origin of
- as pre-eminent god
- as twin of Angra Mainyu
- Yahweh and
- Zeus and
- Akaufachiya* “Mountain-Dwellers,”
- Akitu (New Year’s festival)
- Alan nomads
- Alcohol and *haoma* drink
- Alexander the Great
 - Cyropolis, destruction of
 - as deity
 - as Dhu’l-Qarnain
 - invasion of Persian Empire
 - journey of
 - Life of Alexander* (Plutarch)
- Alexander Mosaic
- Alexander Sarcophagus
- Alphabet, Old Persian. *See also* Cuneiform
- Altars
- Alyattes
- Amasis
- Amesha Spentas (Holy Immortals). *See also* Spenta Mainyu
- Amestris
- Ammianus Marcellinus
- Amorges
- Amytis
- Anahita
- Anaximander of Miletus
- Anaximenes
- Ancestor worship
- Angels
- Angra Mainyu
 - in creation story
 - evil nature of
 - as lion-headed figure
 - rituals for
 - Satan and
 - in sculptures
 - as twin of Ahuramazda
- Animals. *See also specific types of animals*
 - Angra Mainyu as creator of evil species
 - in astrology

- battles, use in
- as god avatars
- hunting of
- Magi use of and treatment of
- on royal standard of Persian Empire
- sacrifice of
- Anshan
- Apadana palace
- Apasiacae nomads
- Apocalypse. *See* Renovation of humanity
- Apollo
- Apple-Bearers
- Aqueducts of Nineveh
- Arabian Peninsula
- Arachosia
- Aramaeans
- Aramaic writing
- Araxes River
- Archery
 - of army of Persian Empire
 - Scythian and Saka nomads and
- Ardashir
- Argoste
- Ariaramnes
- Ariaspian tribe of eastern Iran
- Aristocracy. *See* Nobility
- Armenia
- Armor,
- Army of Babylonia
- Army of Egypt
- Army of Lydia
- Army of Media
- Army of Persian Empire
 - archery of
 - Asia Minor. *See also* Asia Minor, conquest of
 - Babylonia. *See also* Babylonia
 - battle tactics and numbers of
 - cavalry
 - chariots
 - Cyrus as commander of
 - death toll of
 - Eastern Iran and Central Asia. *See also* Eastern Iran and Central Asia, conquest of
- Egypt

- infantry
- Media. *See also* Persian rebellion against Media
- siege warfare and engineering feats
- standing army
- Ten Thousand Immortals
- training, auxiliaries, and organization
- Arrian, Flavius
- Arsames
- Arses
- Arshada
- Arta* (order)
- Artaxerxes I
 - children of
 - death of
 - Egypt, reconquest of
 - Greece, Peace of Callias with
 - Jewish law, codification of
 - Megabyzus and
 - religion during reign of
 - Zoroastrianism and
- Artaxerxes II
- Artaxerxes III (Ochus)
- Artembares
- Artemis
- Artystone
- Aryan Abode
- Aryan people (early Iranians)
- Ashur (Assyrian city)
- Ashur (Assyrian god)
- Ashurbanipal
- Ashurnasirpal II
- Asia Minor, conquest of
 - additional conquests in
 - hostile relations in
 - Lydian revolt and Ionia conquest
 - military forays
 - Sardis, fall of
- Assimilation. *See* Cultural syncretism
- Assyria
 - civil war
 - customs and political organization of
 - engineering feats of
 - fall of empire
 - as great empire

- historical significance of empire
- Iran, conquest of
- Israel, conquest of
- Median revolt
- Nineveh
- Persian Empire modeled after
- religion of
- royal ideology of
- trade with Media

Astrology

Astronomy

- Babylon, study of in
- Greek study of
- for navigation
- in religion. *See also* Sun gods
- solar eclipse
- warfare, predicting

Astvat-ereta

Astyages

- cold war with Babylonia
- Cyrus, early relationship with
- death of
- defeat of
- duration of reign
- indulgent habits of
- legend parallels with
- lineage of
- power consolidation attempt
- redefining kingship
- religion imposed on non-Medians
- response to Persian rebellion
- successor of
- treatment of after defeat

Athens

Atossa

Atradates

Auxiliaries of Persian Empire army

Avatars of gods

Avesta. *See also* *Aban Yash* (hymn to Anahita), *Mihr Yash* (Hymn to Mithra)

- on agriculture
- composition and evolution of
- Daivas in
- on eastern Iran

Gathas
goddess, hymn to
on good and evil dualism
on Kavi Husravah
legends in
Magi and
on nomads
Old and Young
religious degeneration in
Videvdatta (purity rituals) in
Zoroastrian chronology in

Axial Age

Azhi Dahaka

B

Baal

Babylon

Assyrian defeat of
during civil war
creation story of
The Fall of Babylo (Martin)
fortification of
Hanging Gardens of
merchant class of
as seat of power of Persian Empire
surrender to Alexander the Great
Tower of Babel

Babylonia

advance of Persian Empire on
agriculture in
Arabian Peninsula, invasion of
army of
Assyria, conquest of
captivity of gods of
customs of
early conflicts with Persia
Gobryas as traitor
Jews, captivity of
Lydia, alliance with
map of, ancient
Media, interactions with
myths and legends of
Persian Empire defeating
propaganda against Persian Empire
religion of

- revolt against Persian Empire
- societal strife preceding downfall
- tribute bearers

Babylonian Chronicle

- on chattel from Anshan
- on Cyrus' conquests
- on defeat of Astyages
- on Gobryas
- on Gutium province
- on Nabonidus
- on Oebaras
- as political propaganda
- text of
- on unity of Persian tribes

Bactria

Bagapates

Bagiazu

Bagoas

Baluchis people of Persia

Baluchistan

Bandaka (slaves)

Banquets of king

Bardane

Bardiya

- Cyrus' deathbed declaration
- daughter of
- death of
- feud with brother
- popularity of
- usurpers claiming to be

Battle tactics. *See also* Weapons

- bridges used as
- of Drangians
- of Lydians
- of Macedonia
- of Median army
- of Persian army (early)
- of Persian Empire army
- phalanxes
- of Scythian nomads

Belshazzar

- Babylonia, administration of
- death of
- feast of

murder of Gobryas' son

Berossus

Bessus

Bible. *See also specific books*

Babylonian captivity of Jews

Babylon in

canonization of

creation story in

Cyrus' delivery of Jews

Dhu'l-Qarnain in

divine retribution in

Gog and Magog people in

Hammurabi code, influence of

Medes in

non-canonical texts

Satan in

Urartu and Manna in

written records, account of

Yahweh, early references to

Biruni, Abu Rayhan

Bisutun Inscription

on Achaemenes

on administration of Persian Empire government

on Ahuramazda

on army of Persian Empire

on Arshada

on Astyages' lineage

on Bardiya

chronology of conquests

composition of

curse for vandals

on Cyrus' religion

on Darius

on double succession of kings

on Hystaspes

on Medes

on nomads

on Persian Empire

photographs of

on post-mortal judgment

purpose of

on transportation and trade

Bivarasp

Black Obelisk

- Body guards of king. *See also* Ten Thousand Immortals
- Borazjan palace
- Bow-Bearers
- Bribery
- Bridges used in battle
- Bull sacrifice
- Bureaucracy and administration of Persian Empire. *See also* Monarchy of Persian Empire; Satraps
- Burial rites

C

- Calah
- Calendars
- Cambyeses I
 - character of
 - death of
 - marriage to Mandane
 - name origin
- Cambyeses II
 - birth of
 - business dealings of
 - Carthage, treatment of
 - death of
 - Egypt, campaign against
 - feud with brother
 - as governor of Mesopotamia
 - as King of Babylon
 - losing throne
 - marriage to Atossa
 - marriage to Phaidime
 - marriage to Roxana
 - navy of
 - reign of
 - as successor to Cyrus
- Camels in battle
- Cannibalism
- Cappadocia
- Caria
- Caspian steppe nomads. *See* Nomads
- Cassandane
- Catapults for battle sieges
- Cattle
- Cavalry of Persian Empire
- Celebrations. *See* Holidays
- Central Asia, conquest of. *See* Eastern Iran and Central Asia, conquest

- of
- Ceremonial government positions
- Ceremonies. *See also* Rituals
 - coronation
 - Proskynesis*
- Chahar bagh* gardens
- Chaldaeans
- Chariots
 - in art
 - disadvantage of in battle
 - earliest
 - gods riding in
 - royal
 - scythed
- Children of Cyrus. *See also* Bardiya; Cambyses II
- China
- Chissantakhma
- Chorasmia
- Christianity
- Chrysostom, Dio
- Cilicia
- Cimmerian nomads
- Close-kin marriages
- Clothing style
 - of army of Persian Empire
 - of Elamites
 - of Indians
 - of king of Persian Empire
 - of Medes
 - of Persians
 - of Saka nomads
- Cnidus
- Codomannus *See* Darius III
- Coins and money
 - of Alexander the Great
 - of Darius
 - of Lydia
 - in Persian Empire
 - reward to women for battle
 - sacred
 - Sardis' treasury, taken from
- Communication in Persian Empire
- Concubines
- Conscription to military duty

- Coronation ceremonies
- Corvée labor
- Cossaeans
- Courier service
- Creation stories
 - Babylonian
 - Bible
 - Zoroastrian
- Croesus
- Ctesias
 - on Amorges
 - on Astyages, capture of
 - on Astyages, death of
 - authenticity of writings
 - on Bactria
 - on Bardia
 - on Croesus
 - on Cyrus
 - on fighting in the west
 - on Kadusians
 - on Oebaras
 - on Parthia
 - on Persian Empire
 - Persica*,
 - propaganda, legends used as
 - on Roxana
 - on Spitamas' death
 - on successor of Astyages
 - on transportation and travel
- Cube of Zoroaster (Ka'ba-ye Zartusht)
- Cultural diversity
 - clothing styles and
 - Cyrus' education facilitating
 - of Persian Empire
 - tolerance of
 - in Xerxes' army
- Cultural syncretism
 - in early Iran
 - of Iranian nomads
 - of Jews and Persians
 - in Persian Empire
- Cunaxa, Battle of
- Cuneiform
- Curtius Rufus, Quintus

Cyaxares

- Assyria, conquest of
- duration of reign
- military reforms of Media
- other conquests
- political organization of Media

Cyprus

Cypress tree of Zoroaster

Cyropaedia (Xenophon)

- army of Persian Empire in
- Babylonia, conquest of
- on courier service
- on Cyrus
- on Gobryas
- on Kadusian campaigns

Cyrtian tribe of Iran

Cyrus I

Cyrus II

- Anahita and
- ancestry of
- Armenians, relationship with
- art, depicted in
- characteristics of
- as commander of Persian army
- conquests of. *See* Army of Persian Empire
- death of. *See also* Death of Cyrus
- dream-prophecy of
- family life of
- heritage of
- as king of Persian Empire
- legacy of
- legends of
- Magi and
- marriage to Amytis
- marriage to Cassandane
- marriage to Nitetis
- military and political experience, early
- as monarch. *See also* Monarchy of Persian Empire
- name origin and titles
- nobility and
- origins and early years of
- palaces of. *See* Pasargadae
- poems about
- rebellion against Media. *See also* Persian rebellion against Media

religious beliefs of. *See also* Religion during Cyrus' reign
songs about
succession of, dispute over
as successor to Astyages, controversy
tomb of. *See* Tomb of Cyrus
traveling as political policy

Cyrus the Younger

Cyrus, Morghab, Inscriptions a-c

Cyrus Cylinder

Achaemenes absence in
Babylon, conquest of
on Cyrus
on Gutium province
historical significance of
and return of Jews
on Persian Empire
photograph of
on restoration of idols
on restoration of temples
on salvation doctrine
Second Isaiah, parallels with
on Teispes
terminology used in
text of

D

Dahae nomads

Dahyava tribute lists

Dai tribe *see* Dahae nomads

Daiukku

Daiva Inscription

Daivas

Daniel

Daniel, Book of

Darius

address on monarchy
as Bow-Bearer to Cyrus
business dealings of
children of
in Cyrus' dream-prophecy
death of
depicted at Persepolis
in Egypt
Gaumata killed by
as king of Persian Empire

- legitimacy, fight for
- lineage of
- lower Indus, reaching
- marriage to Artystone
- marriage to Atossa
- Mithraic cult and
- name origin
- palaces of. *See also* Persepolis
- punishment of pretenders
- record keeping system. *See* Persepolis Fortification Tablets
- reign of
- religion of
- satraps of
- as Spear-Bearer to Cambyses II
- tax reform of
- tomb of

Darius II

Darius III

Dead Sea Scrolls

Death of Cyrus

- burial

- final campaign before

- nomads, battle with

Death toll of battles

Deioces

Demons. *See also* Evil spirits

Deportations

- to combat uprisings

- of Iranian people

- of Israelites

- of Jews

- of Saka tribes

Derbices nomads

Derusiaei tribe of Iran

Deserters from army

Devil. *See* Angra Mainyu; Satan

Dhu'l-Qarnain

Diaspora of Iranian people

Dinon of Colophon (historian)

Diodorus

Divine expression

Divine protection

Divine retribution

Dogs

Dragons . *See also* Azhi Dahaka
Drangiana
Dreams. *See* Prophecies
Drinking bowls and rhytons
Dropici *see* Derbices
Dualism of good and evil. *See also* Truth and Lie, conflict between
Dual kingship
Dynastic Prophecy

E

Eastern Iran and Central Asia, conquest of
Ecbatana
Education
Egypt
 army of
 battles with Babylonia
 Cambyses II and
 Cyrus and
 Darius and
 god-kings of
 Lydia, alliance with
 reconquest of
 revolt against Persian Empire
Egyptian canal
Ehulhul Temple
Elam and Elamites
 art of
 Assyria, battles with
 Babylonia/Media cold war and
 god-king concept in
 origins of
 Persian annexation of
 Persian culture, influence on
 Persian Empire army, serving in
 Persian rule of
Elephants
Ellipi
End-of-days. *See* Renovation of humanity
Engineering feats of Persian army
Ephorus
Epics. *See* Myths and legends; *specific titles*
Esagila temple
Esarhaddon
Eschatology. *See also* Renovation of humanity
Esther, Book of

Ethics. *See also* Dualism of good and evil
Eudoxus of Cnidus
Eunuchs
Euphrates River
Eurasian nomads. *See* Nomads
Eurybatus
Evil. *See also* Angra Mainyu; Dualism of good and evil; Satan
Evil spirits. *See also* Demons
Exile of Jews
Exodus, Book of
Ezekiel
Ezra
Ezra, Book of

F

Falconry
The Fall of Babylo (Martin)
Famine
Farming. *See* Agriculture
Farnah. *See* Royal Glory (*Farnah*)
Father of History. *See* Herodotus
Federalist system of Persian Empire
Ferdowsi, Abol Qassem
Fire
 communication signals
 Mithraic cult and
 at renovation of humanity
 ritualistic
 royal
 self-immolation
 Zoroastrianism and
Fish-man
Folk history. *See* Myths and legends
Forced deportation. *See* Deportations
Fortification of Babylon
Fortification of Ecbatana
Fratricide
Fravartish (Phraortes)

G

Gadatas
Gagi
Gandaran tribe of eastern Iran
Gardens,
Gateway of All Lands at Persepolis

- Gathas
- Gaumata the Magian
- Gaza
- Gedrosian desert
- Genesis, Book of
- Geographies* (Strabo)
- Germanii tribe of Iran
- Gifts given by Cyrus
- Gobryas
 - Babylonia, conquest of
 - daughter of
 - as governor of Babylon
 - name origin
 - province of
 - temples, oversight of
 - as traitor to Babylonia
 - waterways constructed by
- God-kings
- Godnappings
- Gods. *See* Religions
- Gog and Magog people
- Good Religion. *See* Zoroastrianism
- Government of Persian Empire. *See* Monarchy of Persian Empire; Satraps
- Great Renovation. *See* Renovation of humanity
- Greece and the Greeks. *See also* Alexander the Great; Asia Minor, conquest of
 - attitude toward Persian rule
 - battles with Persian Empire
 - god-kings and
 - heroic age of
 - Persian influence on
 - proskynesis* and
 - Sparta
 - trade with Iran
 - Xerxes' invasion of
- Greeting customs of Persians
- Guardian spirits
- Gubaru. *See also* Gobryas
- Gutium province
- Gyndes River

H

- Hall of a Hundred Columns at Persepolis
- Hammurabi code

- Hammurabi stela
- Hamun region
- Hanging Gardens of Babylon
- Hanging prophecies
- Haoma* drinkn74n
- Haoma god
- Harems
- Harpagus
 - Asia Minor, other conquests in
 - Cyrus, relationship with
 - defecting to Persian army
 - Greece, invasion of
 - legend parallels with
 - in legends of Cyrus
 - name origin
 - religious beliefs of
 - similarities with Babylonian Gobryas
- Harpy Tomb
- Harran
- Hatru*-conscription
- The Head of Cyrus Brought to Queen Tomyris* (Rubens)
- Heaven
- Hecataeus
- Hell
- Hellenism
- Hellespont
- Henotheism
- Heracleides of Cyme
- Herodotus
 - Achaemenid army roster
 - on Achaemenid genealogy
 - on administration of Persian Empire
 - on agriculture
 - on army of Persian Empire
 - on Astyages
 - on Babylonia, conquest of
 - on Bactria
 - on Bardiya
 - on Cambyses II
 - on Caria and Xanthus
 - on Croesus
 - on Cyaxares
 - on Cyrus
 - on Darius

- on Greece
- on Harpagus
- The Histories*,
- on Lydian defeat
- on the Magi
- on Median unification
- Medikos Logos*, 566
- on nomad tribes
- on Persian Empire
- on Persian greeting
- on Phocaeans
- propaganda, legends used as
- on punishment of Gyndes River
- on religion
- on Roxana
- on satraps
- on solar eclipse
- on transportation and travel

Heroic age of Iran

The Histories. *See* Herodotus

Holidays

- Akitu (New Year's Festival)

- king's birthday

- Mithrakana

- "Persian Dance,"

- special Akitu of Sin

- "Zoroastrianized" version of Mithrakana

Holy Immortals. *See* Amesha Spentas

Holy Spirit. *See* Spenta Mainyu (Holy Spirit)

Hoplite warfare

Hormozgan

Horses

- in art

- in battle

- cavalry of Persian Empire,

- for chariots

- courier services, use in

- sacrifice of

- value to society

Humanity, renovation of. *See* Renovation of humanity

Human sacrifice

Human suffering

Hunting

Huvadaichaya

Hymn to Mithra. *See Mihr Yash*

Hyrceanian tribe of Iran

Hyroeades

Hystaspes

I

Ibycus

Immortality of human soul

Incestuous marriages. *See* Close-kin marriages

India

- conquests in

- early religion

- origin of people of

Indo-Iranian gods. *See also* paganism

Infant mortality

Infantry of Persian army

Inns for travelers

Inscriptions and chancellery of Persian Empire,. *See also specific inscriptions*

Ionia

Iran, early

- aboriginal people of

- agriculture of

- Assyrian defeat of

- civilization structure of

- concept of history of

- customs of

- diaspora of people

- eastern, conquest of

- heroic age in

- linguistic origins

- migration and conquests in

- myths of

- native tribes of. *See also specific tribes*

- political division of tribes

- religion of

- unification of

Irrigation projects

Isaiah, Book of. *See also* Second Isaiah

Ishtar

Ishtar Gate

Isis and Osiris (Plutarch)

Islam

Isocrates

Israel. *See also* Jews and Judaism

Cyrus, relationship with
first awareness of Cyrus
Iranian religious influence on
submission to Babylonia
treatment of Jews

J

Jehoiakim

Jehoiakin

Jeremiah

Jerusalem

Jews and Judaism. *See also* Israel

Arabia, arrival in

Babylonia, relationship with
deportation of

exile of

henotheism and

institutionalization of religious practices

Iranian religious influence on, xxv5162

myths and legends of

Persian treatment of and influence on

reparations from Cyrus

repatriation of4840

revolt against Persian Empire

Josephus, Flavius

Josiah

Judah

Judgment, post-mortal. *See also* Renovation of humanity

Justin

K

Kadusians

Kamboja tribe of eastern Iran

Karanos “leader of people,”

Kassites

Kavi Aurvataspa

Kavi Husravah

Kavi Vishtaspa135

Keresaspa

Khorasan Road

Khosr River

Khshathrapati,

*Khshathrita*13

Kings. *See also* Monarchy of Persian Empire; *specific kings*
in art

- Assyrian grandeur of
- clothing style of
- coronation of
- death of
- dining with
- god-kings
- installing new king
- Jewish
- land ownership of
- punishment for rebellion against
- Kings, Book of. *See Shahnameh* (Ferdowsi)
- Kings Peace
- Kuh-e Khwaja
- Kurash. *see* Cyrus I
- Kurdistan
- Kurds
- Kuru tribe of eastern Iran
- Kyuzeli Gyr

L

- Lamentations, Book of
- Land ownership and grants
- Land taxes
- Lapis lazuli
- Law codes
- Legends. *See* Myths and legends
- Leisure activities
- Leonidas
- Letoon Inscription
- Levant
- Leviathan
- Leviticus, Book of
- Lie and lying. *See also* Truth and Lie, conflict between
 - in creation story
 - defeating at end-of-time
 - enemies punished for
 - Mithra's punishment for
- Life of Alexander* (Plutarch)
- Linguistic evolution
- Lions
 - in art
 - as avatar
 - hunting
 - killing bull
- Local officials' role in Persian Empire

Lookout posts
Lors, ethnology of
Luxury goods
Lycia
Lydia
Lygdamis
Lysander

M

Macedonia. *See also* Alexander the Great

Madyes (Partatua)

Magi

- animals, use and treatment of
- customs of
- Cyrus and
- dream interpretation by
- foreign religious influence on
- Greeks, influence on
- history preservation by
- as magistrates in Media
- migration of
- name origin
- purge of
- revival of
- sorcery of

Magic

Magog people

Maka

Malalas, John

Mandane

Manna

Mar Apas Catina

Maraphian tribe of Iran

Mardian tribe of Iran³⁸

Marduk

- Ahuramazda and
- in art
- campaign to replace
- in Cyrus Cylinder
- Darius and
- Esagila temple
- Judaism and
- priests of
- refounding of cult of
- rituals of

- in Sippar Cylinder
- Tower of Babel and
- Marriage. *See also* Political marriages
 - close-kin
 - cross-cultural
 - of Magi
 - market for
 - polygamy
 - of Saka Tigrakhauda nomads
 - wives as gifts
- Marv Dasht
- Maspian tribe of Iran
- Massagetae nomads
- Matriarchy
- Mazares
- Mazdaism. *See also* Ahuramazda
- Media and the Medes. *See also* Persian rebellion against Media
 - army of
 - Assyria, conquest of
 - Assyria, trade with
 - Babylonia, relationship with
 - battle tactics of
 - clothing style
 - customs and society of
 - Cyrus' childhood at
 - early Medes
 - early references to
 - influence on Persian Empire
 - Lydia, treaty with
 - migration through Iran
 - military reforms of
 - name origin
 - nobility, disaffection of and alliance with Cyrus
 - nomads invading
 - other conquests of
 - in Persian Empire army
 - political organization of
 - religion of. *See also* Mithra and Mithraic cult
 - tribal names
 - unification and revolt of
- Median Wall
- Megabernes
- Megabyzus
- Mercenaries

Meroe

Mesopotamia

Messiah

in book of Daniel

Cyrus as

Judean

Zoroastrian

Migration

early Iranian

of Medes through Iran

of Persians into Iran

in response to invasion

Mihr Yash (Hymn to Mithra)

composition of

Deioces' legend

Iranian borders in

Mithra in

nomadic peoples, blessing of

reprinted

Zoroaster's origins in

Military of Persian Empire. *See* Army of Persian Empire

Millenarianism

Mithra and Mithraic cult. *See also* *Mihr Yash* (Hymn to Mithra)

Apollo, parallels to

in art

Artaxerxes and

bull sacrifice

Cult of the Planets

Darius, during reign of

Deioces parallels to

fire, significance of

Gaumata's veneration of

human sacrifice and

Khshathrapati, cult title of

Massagetae and

Medes, religion of

Median settlements, desertion of

name origin

Nergal and

Nisaya and

in Persepolis archives

persistence of in modern times

as pre-eminent god

public recognition of

- relocation of followers of
- revival of
- Saka Tigrakhauda and
- in the *Shahnameh*,
- Shamash, influence on
- symbols of
- temples named after
- Tomb of Cyrus, inscriptions on
- Xerxes I and
- Zoroastrianism and
- Mithredath the Treasurer
- Mitradates
- Moats at Babylon
- Mobile towers for battle sieges
- Moloch
- Monarchy of Persian Empire
 - administration and bureaucracy. *See also* Satraps
 - inscriptions and chancellery
 - mission to enhance land
 - origins of
 - quality of
 - as terrible, merciful, and giving
 - transition from tribal leader to king
- Money. *See* Coins and money
- Mongolian tribes
- Monotheism. *See also specific religions*
- Monuments, destruction of
- Moon god. *See* Sin (moon god)
- Moses of Chorene
- Mount Bikni
- Mount Bisutun, . *See also* Bisutun Inscription
- Mourning customs
- Muhammad
- Mycian clan
- Myson vase painting
- Myths and legends. *See also* Creation stories
 - Achaemenes in
 - Azhi Dahaka in
 - Babylonian
 - Cyrus in
 - Dhu'l-Qarnain in
 - Iranian
 - Jewish
 - Median unification

- nature myths
- Oebaras in
- prince reared by eagle
- religion modifying
- Saka nomads in
- savior myths
- women's role in battle

N

Nabonidus

- Arabian Peninsula, invasion of
- in art
- in Babylonian Chronicle
- in Cyrus Cylinder
- defeat and surrender of
- early conflicts with Cyrus
- Gobryas and
- gods, capture of
- Jews, exile of
- as king of Babylonia
- mental stability of
- Persian Empire defeat of
- propaganda against
- religion and reforms during reign of
- Sippar Cylinder of. *See* Sippar Cylinder

Nabopolassar

Nabopolassar's Chronicle

Nabuchadnezzar

- Daniel and
- death of
- dream of
- Egypt, defeat of
- fortification of Babylon
- Hanging Gardens of Babylon
- Judah, defeat of
- reign of

Nabugu

Nahum

Nanis

Naqsh-e Rostam

Native kings. *See* Local officials' role in Persian Empire

Native tribes of Iran. *See also specific tribes*

Nature worship

Navy

Necho II

- Nehemiah, Book of
- Nergal
- Nicholas of Damascus (historian)
- Nile River
- Nimrod
- Nineveh
- Nine Ways, human sacrifice at
- Nisaya
- Nisayan breed of horses
- Nitetis
- Nobility
 - alliance of Persians with Cyrus
 - in art
 - clothing of
 - Jewish
 - Medes
 - of Persian Empire
 - treatment of by Cyrus

- Nomads. *See also specific tribes*
 - Assyrians as
 - Cyrus' final battle and
 - early Iranians as11
 - Medes and

- Numbers, Book of

O

- Occult
- Ochus (Artaxerxes III)
- Oebaras
 - battle role of96
 - Cyrus, relationship with
 - death of
 - legend of
 - name origin
 - reward for service
- Oecumene*,
- Old Avestan. *See* Avesta
- Old Persian Alphabet. *See also* Cuneiform
- Old Persian calendar
- Old Testament. *See* Bible
- Omens. *See also* Prophecies
- Onesicritus
- Opis
- Oracles. *See also* Prophecies
- Oral history

Oroetes
Otanes
Oxus lowlands
Oxyartes

P

Pactyan tribe of eastern Iran
Pactyes
Paganism
Pahlavi religious texts
Palaces of Cyrus. *See* Pasargadae
Palaces of Darius. *See also* Persepolis
Palestine
Panthea
Panthialaei tribe of Iran
Paradises. *See also* Gardens
Parapamisos (Gandara)
Paricanians
Parmises
Parmys
Parsa (Persia)
Partatua
“Parthian shot,” 29
Parthian tribe of eastern Iran
Parysatis
Pasargadae
 architecture
 art, new Persian form of
 Cyrus, Morghab, Inscriptions a-c
 fish-man, images of
 four-winged guardian, images of
 gardens at,
 Gate R
 lay-out of
 Palace P
 Palace S
 Persian/Median battle, site of
 religious plinths at
 Tal-e Takht “Throne Hill,”
 tomb of Cyrus
 Zendan-e Soleiman (Prison of Solomon)
Pasargadae tribe of Iran
Patischorian tribe of Iran
Peace of Antalcidas
Peace of Callias

Pelusium

Pentateuch

Pericles

Persepolis

- Alexander the Great's defeat of

- Apadana palace

- as central archive

- Darius' construction of

- fire altars, images of

- Gateway of All Lands

- Hall of a Hundred Columns

- inscriptions at

- king, images of

- nobles, images of

- proskynesis*, images of

- ruins of

- savior, images of

- tributaries, images of

Persepolis Fortification Seal 93

Persepolis Fortification Tablets

- on communication in Persian Empire

- cross-cultural marriages in

- Elamite influence on Persians

- government officials in

- in Greek

- Magi in

- on Persian Empire

- religion in

- reprinted

- women in

Persepolis Treasury Tablets

Persian Dance

Persian Empire

- after Cyrus

- army of. *See* Army of Persian Empire

- clothing style

- communication in

- conquests of. *See* Army of Persian Empire

- cultural syncretism in

- customs of

- early Persians. *See also* Persian rebellion against Media

- Elam, influence of

- government of. *See* Monarchy of Persian Empire

- heritage of

legacy of Cyrus and
name origin
nobility of
physical appearance of people of
propaganda against Babylonia
rebellion of. *See also* Persian rebellion against Media
seats of power of
during time of Cyrus' rule
transportation and travel in
tribes of

Persian Gulf trade

Persian rebellion against Media

causes of

Cyrus as king of Persia

Cyrus' return to Persia

defeat of Astyages

Ecbatana, capture of

in historical texts

Median nobility, disaffection of

onset of

religious aspects of

The Persians (Aeschylus)

Persica (Ctesias)

Phaidime

Phalanxes

Pharnaspes the Red "Rufus," 79

Pherecydas of Syros

Philistine tribe

Phillip II

Philosophy

Phocaea

Phoenicia

Photius

Phraortes

Planet worship

Plato

Pliny the Elder

Plutarch

on army of Persian Empire

on coronation ceremonies

Cyrus' tomb inscription, translation of

on government of Persian Empire

on honoring women for battle efforts

Of Isis and Osiris,

- on king's costume
- Life of Alexander*,
- on lives of women
- on religious rituals
- on royal tent

Pointed-Hat Sakas. *See* Saka Tigrakhauda nomads

Political decapitation

Political marriages

- Astyages and Aryenis
- Cambyses and Mandane
- Cambyses II and Atossa
- Cambyses II and Phaidime
- Cambyses II and Roxana
- Cyrus and Amytis
- Cyrus and Cassandane
- Cyrus and Nitetis
- Darius and Artystone
- Darius and Atossa
- Nabuchadrezzar and Amytis
- nomads and Iranian aristocracy
- Stryangaeus and Zarina
- Zoroastrianism, spread of

Political prisoners

Polyaenus

Polybius

Polycrates

Polygamy

Population deportation. *See* Deportations

Pretenders to throne. *See also* Gaumata the Magian

Priests. *See also* Magi

- authors of Bible
- in early Iran
- of Marduk in Babylon
- Median, reaffirming
- Zoroastrian

Primogeniture

Prisoners of war. *See* Political prisoners

Processional Way

Procession to war

Propaganda

- Babylonian Chronicle as
- against Gentiles
- Persian and Babylonian
- religious

- Xerxes I, support for
- Property ownership. *See* Land ownership and grants
- Prophecies. *See also* Oracles
 - Astyages' dream-prophecy
 - in Book of Daniel
 - in Book of Isaiah
 - Cyrus' dream-prophecy
 - Dynastic Prophecy
 - Nabuchadnezzar's dream-prophecy

Proskynesis, 367

Prostitution

Psammetichus I

Pteria (Kerkenes Dag)

Punishment for crimes

Pura

Puranas,

Purity laws

- of Magi

- of Zoroastrianism67101

Pyramid Tomb at Sardis

Q

Queens and princesses. *See also specific name*

Quran

R

Rassam, Hormuzd

Rassam Cylinder

Rebellion against Cambyses II

Rebellion of Persia. *See* Persian rebellion against Media

Relics, Zoroastrian

Religion during Cyrus' reign

- Cyrus as Zoroastrian

- Indo-Iranian Gods, return of

- Magi priests. *See also* Magi

- Mithra, foreign influences on

- Mithra and religion of Medes

- Persian rebellion, religious aspects of respect for

- syncretism of

Religions. *See also specific religions and gods*

- Babylonian

- divine expression

- divine retribution

- Indo-Iranian, early

- Lydian
- Persian. *See also* Religion during Cyrus' reign
- tolerance of
- Religious propaganda during war
- Relocation. *See* Deportations; Migration
- Renovation of humanity
- Reparations to Jews
- Repatriation of displaced people
- Resource scarcity
- Revelations, Book of
- Rig Veda
- Rituals. *See also* Purity laws
 - cannibalism
 - coronation. *See* Coronation ceremonies
 - in early Indo-Iranian religion
 - fire and
 - for Marduk
 - prostitution as
 - religious plinths at Pasargadae for
 - for safety
 - of Scythian nomads
 - for temple construction
- Rivalry between Cyrus' sons
- Roads of Persian Empire
- Rostam
- Roxana
- Royal Canal
- Royal Glory (*Farnah*)
 - animals associated with
 - Cyrus and
 - defined
 - for legitimization of king
 - symbols of
- Royal Hero
- Royal Road
- Royal standard of Persian Empire

S

- Sacrifices to gods
 - of animals
 - Cyrus and
 - human
- Sagartian tribe of Iran
- Saka Haumavarga nomads⁸³
- Saka nomads

- Bactria, alliance with
- customs of
- epic traditions of
- Medes and
- as mercenaries for Persian Empire
- name origin
- origins of
- religion of
- Saka Tigrakhauda nomads, . *See also* Dahae nomads; Derbices nomads;
- Massagetae nomads
 - after fall of Cyrus
 - customs and religion of
 - Cyrus' final campaign and
 - ethnography of
 - headgear of
 - matriarchy practice of
 - name origin
 - tribes of
 - Turanian nomads and
- Salamis, Battle of
- Salaries of workers and soldiers
- Samaria
- Samaritans
- Samos
- Sandanis
- Saoshyant
- Saracus
- Sardis, fall of
- Sargon II
- Sargon of Akkad
- Satan
- Satrap
- Sattagydia people
- Scarcity. *See* Resource scarcity
- Scholarly studies at Babylon
- Sciences, study of in Babylon
- Scythed chariots
- Scythian nomads
 - customs of
 - Medes and
 - origins of
 - religion of
 - syncretism with sedentary people
- Second Isaiah

- on Cyrus
- Cyrus Cylinder, parallels with
- Persian Empire, alliances with
- on Royal Road
- on Yahweh
- Secydanius
- Self-immolation
- Semites
- Sennacherib
- Seven conspirators
- Seven Wonders of the Ancient World
- Shahape (Khshathrapati)*,
- Shahnameh* (Ferdowsi)
- Shalmaneser III
- Shamash (sun god)
- Shamash-shum-ukin
- Shamshi-Adad V
- Sheol
- Sheshbazzar
- Siberia, trade with
- Siculus, Diodorus
- Siege warfare of Persian army
- Sin (moon god)
 - Aramaeans cult of
 - Cyrus' veneration of
 - Ehulhul Temple
 - Islam and
 - replacing Marduk
 - sacred nights of
 - symbols of
 - Tema, sanctuary at
- Sippar
- Sippar Cylinder
- Sistan
- Sky. *See also* Astrology; Astronomy
 - embodiment of god in
 - for navigation
 - understanding of
- Slavery
- Snake-shouldered gods and demons
- Social classes
- Sogdiana
- Solar emblem
- Soldiers. *See* Army of Persian Empire

- Spaco
- Spargapise
- Sparta
- Spear-Bearers
- Spenta Mainyu (Holy Spirit)2190
- Spies and informants
 - for corruption control
 - Gobryas as
 - of Media
 - of Persia
- Spirit of God. *See also* Spenta Mainyu
- Spirits. *See* Evil spirits
- Spitaces
- Spitamas
- Standing army of Persia
- Stars. *See* Astrology; Astronomy
- Strabo
 - on agriculture
 - on army of Persian Empire
 - on Bactria
 - on conquest of eastern Iran
 - Geographies*,
 - on nomad tribes
 - on oral history
 - on Persian Empire
 - on Persian victory over Medes
 - on Saka nomads
 - on Sogdiana
- Successor disputes of monarchy
- Suicide
- Sun gods
 - Ahuramazda, relation to,142
 - Anahita, relation to
 - Apollo
 - of Massagetae
 - Mithra 593
 - Shamash
 - solar emblem
- Superstitions
- Susa
 - Alexander the Great, surrender to
 - Assyrian invasion of
 - Babylonia/Media cold war and
 - bas-relief of,

Darius' palace at
during Elamite power
fresco at
as seat of power of Persian Empire
Susa Acropolis Texts
Swords, mystical quality of
Syncretism. *See* Cultural syncretism
Syria

T

Tabalus
Tabari
Takht-e Madar-e Soleiman
Tal-e Malyan
Tal-e Takht
Tal-e Zahhak
Tamerlane
Taq-e Bostan
Tarbishu
Tattoos
Tax collection
Teispes
Tema
Temples
 of Artemis
 in Babylon
 Cyrus' closure of
 of Elamites
 Median
 restoration in Babylon
 restoration in Jerusalem
 of Sin (moon god)
 of Solomon
 of Yahweh
Ten Thousand Immortals
Tents, royal
Tepe Nush-e Jan
Thales of Miletus
Thamanaean people
Thermopylae, Battle of
Thraetona
Throne Hill (Tal-e Takht)
Tiglathpileser III
Tigranes
Tigris River

Time, concept of
Tithes from royal treasury
Tobit, Book of
Tomb of Cyrus
 Alexander the Great visiting
 design of
 garden at
 inscription on
 Mithraic symbols on
 photograph of
 ruins of
Tomyris
Torah
Tower of Babel
Tower of Silence (dakhma)
Towers built for battle sieges
Trade and retail
 encouraged by unity and security
 of Jews
 in Lydia
 between Media and Assyria
 in Persian Empire
 Persian Gulf trade
 of Phoenicia
Training of military
Transoxiana, conquest of
Transportation and travel
Treaties facilitated by Persian Empire
Triarchy of Persian Empire
Tribalism
Tribes
 of early Persia. *See also specific tribes*
 politics of
Truth and Lie, conflict between
Turanian nomads
Turco-Mongolian tribes

U

Ugbaru. *See also* Oebaras
Ultimogeniture
Umman Manda
Universal salvation
Urartu
Utians
Uxian tribe of Elam

V

Verethragna (war god)⁵⁴
Verse Account of Nabonidus
Victory parade in Babylon
Videvdatta,
Vindafarnah
Virgin birth of savior

W

Warlords in early Iran
War politics
Water, goddess of
Water distribution as political tool
Water-screw
Wealth distribution in Media
Weapons
 bronze
 mobile towers for battle sieges
 of Persian Empire army
 scythed chariots
Wine

Women

 in Babylonia
 battles, participating in⁷⁶
 as concubines
 harems
 at kings banquet
 matriarchy and
 as performers for king
 as prisoners of war
 as prostitutes
 queens and princess. *See also specific names*
 stereotypes of
Wrathful Aggression (*Aeshma*),
Wrestling in battle
Written history and records. *See also specific texts*

X

Xanthus
Xenophanes
Xenophon. *See also Cyropaedia*
 on army of Persian Empire
 on Babylonia, defeat of
 on Bactria

- on Bardia
- on communication in Persian Empire
- on Cyrus
- on early Persia
- on educational system
- on Egyptian campaign
- on Gobryas
- on Lydian defeat
- on the Magi
- on Median/Babylonian cold war
- on Persian Empire

Xerxes I

- appearance of
- army of
- assassination of
- Cyrus' religion in inscriptions of
- Daivas, persecution of
- depicted at Persepolis
- Greece, invasion of
- Hellespont, punishment of
- human sacrifice and
- as king of Persian Empire
- lineage of
- Mithraic cult and

Xerxes II

Y

Yahweh

- abstract, transition to
- Ahramazda and
- creative powers of
- Cyrus and
- Darius and
- early portrayal of

Yima

Young Avestan. *See* Avesta

Z

Zagros, people of

Zahhak

Zedekiah

Zendan-e Soleiman

Zeus

Zoroaster

- animal sacrifice, opposition of

Cube of (Ka'ba-ye Zartusht)
Cypress tree planted by
homeland of
life of
as Magian
traditional date of

Zoroastrianism

after Cyrus' rule
afterlife and final judgment
Ahuramazda. *See* Ahuramazda
Avesta. *See* Avesta
in Bactria
chronology of
creation story of
Cyrus' belief in
Cyrus' rule, influence on
Darius and
of diaspora
among early Persian laity
ethics and
fire, significance of
Indo-Iranian gods, return of
Judaism and
in Media
Mithra religion and
nature worship in
priests of. *See also* Magi
purity laws¹⁰¹
of Saka Tigrakhauda
savior of
temples of